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## Value of Exemption from Professional Examinations: Opinion of Third-Level Accounting Students and Graduates

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*Cork Institute of Technology*

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Cork Institute of Technology  
School of Business  
Department of Accounting and Information Systems

**Value of Exemptions from Professional Examinations:  
Opinion of Third-Level Accounting Students and Graduates**

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This dissertation is submitted for the requirements of the Degree of Masters in  
Business (Research), Cork Institute of Technology

by

Lorraine Cashman Rahilly  
June 2018

Research Supervisor – Sylvia Dempsey BComm FCA MSc (Accounting)

**Ethical Declaration**

The author hereby declares that, except where duly acknowledged, this thesis is entirely her own work and has not been submitted for any other degree in any third level institute.

\_\_\_\_\_

Lorraine Cashman Rahilly (Student)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Sylvia Dempsey (Supervisor)

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my daughter Cara, missed and loved forever.*

*Love you, Little Chicken*

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## Abstract

*In Ireland (and the UK) becoming an accountant usually involves a dual qualification system: a third-level degree followed by training and professional examination. This is commonly conceptualised as learning through knowing followed by learning through doing (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Much debate exists about where the responsibility for the development of knowledge and skills lies. Third-level accounting degrees have been criticised for focusing too much on gaining exemptions from professional examinations, with employers feeling that graduates are not work ready (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). However, anecdotally, students and graduates value exemptions and maximising exemption is important to them. This study explores the views of third-level accounting students and recent graduates to confirm (or not) if exemptions are valued by students and graduates. Mixed methods were used in this study. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted; ten with third-level accounting students and five with recent accounting graduates. The findings from these interviews were supported by information obtained from a survey which had eighty-three respondents; fifty-three students and thirty graduates.*

*All participants expressed a strong preference for gaining exemptions during their degree to expedite qualification. While the development of broader business skills was acknowledged as useful, neither students nor graduates were willing to replace exemption bearing modules. Even though graduates admit to not having all the generic skills needed to be work-ready, both students and graduates were in agreement that exemption-led modules provide the most relevant knowledge for professional life. Students valued exemptions because they believed earning exemptions improves the work-life balance of the accounting graduate during the period of professional training and examination. Exemptions were seen as reducing the effort required by graduates to achieve qualification. Graduates after beginning professional examinations were less concerned about balancing work and study. Instead they view exemptions as having helped to improve employability prospects. Students and graduates believe that earning exemptions demonstrates to employer's the graduates' commitment to their career and willingness (and capability) to complete professional training and examinations.*

*Findings from this study provide qualitative evidence that exemptions are highly valued by accounting students and graduates. Awareness of exemptions should be promoted at the earlier stages of the accounting degree. Graduates did see a lot of benefit from a broader curriculum making students more work ready. Educators should continue to investigate ways of improving generic skills without removing exemptions. Developing broader business skills could be introduced as methods of examining modules (such as group work, presentations and IT reports), rather than replacing exemption-bearing modules.*

# Chapter 1: Introduction to this research

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces this research by providing a background to the study and demonstrating how, using a review of extant accounting education literature, the researcher identified a gap in the literature. This chapter describes the research objectives and the questions posed by the researcher, which were then used to fulfil this objective. The chapter then introduces the third-level education institution used in this research and acknowledges the limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a provision of the structure of the subsequent chapters of this study.

## 1.2 Background to the study

Third-level business degree programmes (in particular accounting degree programmes specialising in accounting) can be accredited by professional accounting bodies (PABs), where the third-level institution complies with and delivers upon agreed educational standards. Students of accredited degrees are eligible to earn exemptions from future professional accountancy examinations. Exemptions are awarded where a student earns above a specific grade in accredited modules, thereby reducing the number of professional examinations graduates need to pass to become qualified accountants. The definition of exemptions used in this study is:

“to certify knowledge and understanding of students in a specific area, as a means to exempt from particular aspects of a further qualification” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 654).

Accreditation is much sought after by third-level institutions, as anecdotally accounting students, graduates and employers value exemptions. The desire by third-level institutions to provide exemptions has led to accounting degrees being technically focused. It is because of the focus on exemption-led content, graduates of accounting degrees are often critiqued as lacking the generic skills needed to be work-ready. As a result the conflict between technical knowledge and skills has led to a call for reform in accounting education.

### **1.3 Cork Institute of Technology**

Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) is a third-level institution that administers a wide range of full-time and part-time higher education courses at degree and masters levels. Accredited accounting degree programmes run by the School of Business offer exemptions from professional accountancy examinations across the full range of PABs. In this sense, accounting degrees offered by CIT are very much exemption-led, allowing the accounting student to maximise the number of exemptions that they can earn while still at college.

The researcher of this study graduated from the Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Accounting from Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) in 2016. She has previously worked in an accounting role for a rural development company for a number of years. She decided to continue her studies in CIT, to do a Master in Business (Research). On graduating with an accounting degree, the researcher obtained the maximum number of exemptions available from professional accounting examinations in ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountancy). This led the researcher to question whether accounting students and graduates appreciate or value exemptions from professional examinations. Much has been written in accounting education literature about accounting graduates ability to be work-ready,

but there is a dearth of literature confirming the value of exemptions to accounting graduates.

During her research, the researcher tutored business students in the area of Accounting and Information Systems. As the researcher was studying and working in CIT, information and access to contact details for participants of this study was readily available.

### **1.4 Gaps in the Literature**

An accounting qualification typically entails a dual process, where a third-level degree is followed by a training contract combined with professional examination (Wilson, 2011; Howieson *et al.*, 2014). Third-level education is seen to provide students with a valuable knowledge base and develops in students the confidence needed to question the work issues that will come before them. The training contract allows graduates to build on this knowledge and apply it to real-life work situations (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). As articulated by Apostolou & Gammie (2014):

“The role of university is to prepare students to become accountants, whereas the role of professional training is to prepare trainees to be accountants” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 667)

During an accounting degree students have the opportunity to earn exemptions from future professional exams and are believed to be an important part of becoming an accountant (Harvey, 2004; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). On graduating with an accounting degree the accounting profession expects graduates to have sufficient technical knowledge and skills to be work-ready (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling &



De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). Extant literature discusses how many commentators have found accounting graduates often lack the skills needed for the workplace (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Third-level accounting degrees are widely criticised for focusing too much on gaining exemptions from professional examinations, with employers feeling that graduates are not work-ready (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). Third-level institutions continue to focus on technical knowledge despite many in the profession seeing generic skills as more important and more closely aligned with career success (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Flood, 2014). It is these issues that has led to a call for reform to accounting education (Paisey & Paisey, 2000; Byrne & Flood, 2003; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Cunningham, 2014; Evans, 2014; Dellaportas, 2015).

The researcher set out to examine what it is accounting students and graduates expect from an accounting degree. As part of that, this study wishes to answer whether accounting students and graduates really value exemptions from professional examinations. It sets out to investigate whether there are other educational areas accounting students would benefit from as they embark on their professional career.

### **1.5 Objectives of this Study**

As mentioned earlier, students and graduates are seen to value exemptions. But this study seeks to confirm whether or not this is actually the case through qualitative research methods. As such the objective of this study is to explore the:

*“Value of Exemptions from Professional Examinations:  
Opinion of Third-Level Accounting Students and Graduates”*

This research objective will be achieved by answering four research questions. Firstly the researcher will investigate what it is accounting students find important about the process of becoming an accountant. This will be achieved by answering the following question:

1. What do accounting students value about the accounting qualification process?

Secondly to determine the participants understanding about exemptions, the following question was asked:

2. When and how do accounting students first learn about exemptions?

Thirdly it was necessary to determine the value participants place on earning exemptions relative to a broader education, so the following question was posed:

3. Should exemptions be given priority during accounting education?

Finally to determine why exemptions were valued by students and graduates, the following question was investigated:

4. Why are exemptions important to accounting students and graduates in becoming an accountant?

The findings from these research questions will help the researcher to achieve the overall research objective.

## **1.6 Focus of the Study**

This dissertation will focus on the opinions of accounting students and graduates as to the value of exemptions from professional examinations. This is where this study will add to the literature in this field. The study will focus on the opinions of current accounting students and recent graduates of the accounting degree programme in Cork Institute of Technology. It will examine the opinions of the participants to determine the actual value and importance placed by them on exemptions as part of the accounting qualification process. These findings should be applicable to accounting programmes in other HEI's.

## **1.7 Limitations of this Research**

In fulfilment of the requirements for a Masters in Business (Research), this dissertation was the first major piece of academic research undertaken by the researcher.

The main limitation of this study lies in the bias or perceived bias of the study. Participants of the online surveys were current accounting students and recent accounting graduates of CIT. The students represented were in third and fourth year of their degree programmes, some of whom did not have work placement experience prior to the survey. From talking to graduates, who have experience of the workplace, the researcher felt that the benefit of work experience provides a different understanding about how exemptions impacts the accounting qualification process. The graduates in this study represented a diverse spread across professional accounting bodies, industry and practice. Some were fully qualified, others were still undertaking professional examinations. The diversity of the participants in the survey did not allow the researcher to determine the views of any specific professional

sector or PAB. However it did show an alignment of opinions about how exemptions are valued among the participants in the study.

The programme in CIT is very much exemption-led, and students and graduates of CIT may have been influenced by that. This is acknowledged throughout the study, but it is also a limitation of the study. If this study was done somewhere else there may have been very different results. This is an area the researcher wishes to pursue further after this study has been completed.

## **1.8 Structure of the Study**

An in-depth synthesis of the existing literature relating to this research is provided in the next chapter of this study. Chapter two commences with an examination of the accounting qualification process with a particular focus on the role of third-level institutions. It discusses the issue surrounding the call for reform of accounting education due to the conflict between knowledge and skill development in accounting degrees. It examines arguments against reform and investigates the benefits and drawbacks of accreditation of accounting degrees and the awarding of exemptions to accounting students. The main commentators cited in this chapter include Albrecht and Sack (2000), Harvey (2004), Jackling and De Lange (2008), Pan and Perera (2012), Apostolou and Gammie (2014), Flood (2014), Paisey and Paisey (2014), St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) and Bayerlein and Timpson (2017).

Chapter three sets out the research strategy chosen to achieve the research objective. It commences with a definition of research and discusses the research objective and research questions for this study. It then provides a description of qualitative and quantitative research techniques and discusses a mixed method approach. The chapter then justifies the use of interviews and surveys for this study with a

description of the advantages and disadvantages for both. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the research methodology used for this study.

Chapter four provides a profile of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), the third level institution where the study is based. It discusses the history, the different facilities and its staff and students. It then moves onto CIT's mission statement and vision for the future. A discussion of the structure of CIT and the different departments is also provided.

The findings of this research are set out in chapter five. This chapter provides a discussion of the findings in relation to the value of exemptions to accounting students and graduates. It begins by discussing what it is accounting students believe they benefit from when studying for an accounting degree. It investigates what motivates accounting students to study while at college. This is followed by a discussion on the understanding and influence of exemptions on accounting students at third-level. It determines why exemptions are valued by both accounting students and graduates, and discusses whether exemptions are valued for similar reasons. The influence of exemptions on employability is considered next and if examinations at third-level are really different to professional examinations and why.

Finally chapter six presents the conclusion of this research by answering, in detail, the research questions of this paper. It validates the findings of the extant literature review and adds to this body of literature. It concludes with suggestions for further areas of research.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the background to this research. It commented on the extensive literature available on the accounting qualification process and the work-readiness of accounting graduates. It discussed the dearth of literature on the role and importance of exemptions to accounting students and graduates. The chapter set out

the research objectives and the research questions that will be used to achieve this objective. This chapter outlined the accounting degree within CIT and acknowledged that these programmes are exemption-led. It also stated the limitations to this research. This chapter concluded with an outline of the structure of the remainder of the study, from the literature review, research methodology, CIT, findings and conclusion.

## **2 Review of Accounting Education Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the extant accounting education literature in relation to becoming an accountant. While this study aims to explore the value of a third-level accounting degree, the literature review begins with a description of the process of becoming an accountant. It focuses specifically on the dual qualification process of education and training that exists in Ireland and the UK. It considers, in particular, where the responsibility for the roles of knowledge and skill development lies.

Academics offer varied and diverse views on how the knowledge and skills of accountants should be obtained. This chapter goes on to discuss the widespread call for reform by academics of the accounting qualification process. In particular interest to this study, it examines if accreditation of third-level degrees and the awarding of exemptions to third-level graduates from professional examinations, limits the ability of educators to implement the innovations and changes called for.

This chapter acknowledges the dearth of literature on the value of exemptions in accounting education. Much of the literature concentrates on graduates' generic skill deficiencies, however this shortage may be caused by third-level educators focus on earning exemptions. This leads the researcher to question whether or not the awarding of exemptions to students at third level is valued by the students.

## 2.2 Becoming an Accountant

The process of becoming an accountant in Ireland (and the UK) is, for most, a dual qualification system. It usually involves obtaining a third-level degree (widely referred to as education), followed by a period of professional training and completion of professional accountancy examinations (widely referred to as training). Wilson (2011) described this dual process as;

“...a degree is followed by a specified period in professional practice, with separate assessment for licensing purposes” (Wilson, 2011, p. 3).

The education component focuses mainly on developing the accounting students relevant technical knowledge. Education takes place within an academic framework set by third-level institutions and is governed by its rules and standard. Usually accounting degrees are of 3 to 4 years duration. Assessment is usually based on a mix of continuous assessment and final examinations. Continuous assessments are used to assess the students progress throughout the semester. However the majority of the result is based on final examinations. While as mentioned the content and assessment method are governed by the rules and standards, it will be seen later that professional accounting bodies have a strong influence on this process. In this way third-level education is seen as learning through knowing (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

Time spent in full-time accounting education is followed by a period of training of usually 3 to 3 ½ years in duration in either industry or practice. Wilson (2011) describes this progression from education to training as “the phase in which trainees prepare to be accountants.” (pp. 4-5). Graduates undergo training in the workplace, while also completing their remaining professional examinations. Studying for professional examinations is seen as extending the graduates’ knowledge base



developed at third-level (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). While their training record ensures that relevant work is being done.

Training provides trainees with an opportunity to apply knowledge to real-life scenarios. As a result of doing the work, graduates develop a deeper understanding and comprehension of the theoretical knowledge they have learnt in third-level and continue to acquire when studying for professional examinations. This is where students learn how to apply the theory learnt to practice, further develop skills and competences required of the profession and complete their professional accounting examinations. While third-level education is seen as learning through knowing, professional training is seen as learning through doing (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

By successfully graduating from a third-level degree programme, students may qualify for exemptions from some of the professional accounting examinations. This is particularly relevant to those who are graduating from business or accounting degree programmes (Harvey, 2004; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Exemptions are available from professional examinations where two conditions are met. First, the third-level programme or individual modules must have been awarded accreditation from a professional accountancy body. Second, the graduate must achieve a particular overall grade in the programme, and grades in particular modules (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Once these requirements are met, the graduate will have less professional examinations to complete when on their training contract.

Anecdotally it is understood that third-level students and graduates value these exemptions. The main reason they value them is that when they graduate, and are working and studying, they will have less professional examinations to do. Exemptions are also seen to be valued by potential employers, as exemptions reduce the time, effort and cost to their employees doing professional examinations (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

Third-level institutions often promote their programmes based on the level of exemptions that the programmes hold. As such they place value on these exemptions and assume that potential students recognise the value of exemptions. This is evident from the promotional material published on their websites. For example potential students of the BBus (Honours) in Accounting in CIT are told that:

“The BBus (Honours) in Accounting currently has excellent exemptions for Chartered Accountants Ireland, Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, and Certified Public Accountants. These exemptions ensure that our graduates can minimise the number of exams necessary to qualify as an accountant after completing their Honours Degree” ([www.cit.ie/course/CR400](http://www.cit.ie/course/CR400) ).

To promote their BSc in Accounting in UCC (University College Cork), the UCC website states that:

“Students obtain the highest number of possible professional accounting body exemptions available from an undergraduate degree” ([www.ucc.ie/en/ck202](http://www.ucc.ie/en/ck202) ).

In relation to the BBus (honours) in Accounting in GMIT (Galway Mayo Institute of Technology), the website stated that:

“This degree gives unbeatable exemptions from the exams of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Chartered Accounting Ireland (CAI) and Certified Public Accountants (CPA), in addition to exemptions from The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)” ([www.gmit.ie/accounting/bachelor-business-honours-accounting](http://www.gmit.ie/accounting/bachelor-business-honours-accounting)).

On the surface the roles of education and training in preparing to become an accountant appear easy to separate and examine. However an in-depth review of the accounting education literature, reveals many question how effectively prepared

accounting graduates are for professional life after college. Much of the literature discusses graduates lack of work-readiness and whose responsibility this should be, whether it is the role of education or training. Some of this debate focuses on the role, content and style of learning during third-level education. Questions are asked about whether graduates fully understand how to apply knowledge learnt by them and whose responsibility it is for developing the professional knowledge base expected by employers (Wilson et al., 2009).

### *2.2.1 Learning through Education and Training*

According to the “Objectives of Education for Accountants” report by the AECC (1990), a third-level degree should prepare students to *become* accountants. As such third-level education is seen as a time to provide for the broad development of the individual student. According to this report, education is not only to acquire technical knowledge but also to encourage students to demonstrate a questioning mind and independent thinking. The accounting education literature sees this being done, by providing an opportunity for students to reflect on the knowledge developed and critically engage with the modular content of their programmes (Mathews, 2001; Wilson, 2011; Paisey & Paisey, 2014).

However much of the accounting education literature view time in third-level education as preparation for life in the working world, other than just acquiring the technical knowledge needed in practice (Paisey and Paisey, 2014). Paisey and Paisey (2014) suggests that knowledge is acquired by learning through knowing at third-level, yet part of the education process is about hands-on experience. They argue that it is only once students see knowledge put into practice that it is fully understood.

Education is thus considered to be broader than just learning knowledge or preparing students to apply that knowledge, it is about questioning what has been learnt and using it to learn more. Education should develop in students the confidence needed to

question the work-issues that will come before them (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). It should embed in students the importance of and need to continue to learn throughout the accountant's professional life;

“At the time of entry [professional training] graduates cannot be expected to have the range of knowledge and skills of experienced professional accountants... pre-entry education should lay the base on which life-long learning can be built. In other words, graduates should be taught how to learn.” (AECC, 1990, p. 307).

Learning through training allows graduates to build on this knowledge and apply it to real-life work situations. During training graduates focus on the development and understanding of workplace tasks, procedures and skills. It enables them to put into practice the knowledge acquired during third-level (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). It allows graduates to apply all they have learnt about financial and management accounting theory and standards, the rules and principles of taxation, corporate law and governance. Knowledge learnt during third-level education expands through experience in a real work life environment. In the workplace trainee accountants are encouraged “to question established positions” (Mathews, 2001, p. 120) and evaluate how they can be used or improved (Cunningham, 2014).

“Critical thinking helps one evaluate ideas and solutions resulting from creative thinking against predetermined criteria to see whether any of them will work, what types of problems are associated with them, whether they can be improved, and which ideas are better than others” (Cunningham, 2014, p. 403).

The concept of critical thinking introduced at third-level becomes an important part of accounting training. It requires students to draw on their knowledge, to think independently and evaluate each scenario on its merits.

On review of the literature, the contribution third-level education and employers make to the accounting qualification process while different, is much more aligned than a separation of knowing and doing (AECC, 1990; Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Because education is seen to prepare students for their future career through professional knowledge development, it was interesting to examine how the literature believes education should approach learning.

### *2.2.2 Third-Level approaches to learning*

Accounting education research suggests that successful student outcomes happen because of the experiences accounting students are exposed to during third-level education (Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Entwistle, 1997; Byrne, Flood & Willis, 2002). Students who seek out information, access resources and work alongside their peers, achieve better academic performances, when they feel empowered to learn how to learn (Byrne, Flood, & Willis, 2002). In order to help third-level students achieve this educators must first understand how students learn (AECC, 1990).

Many commentators believe that accounting students should graduate with a sufficient level of knowledge and skills necessary to be work ready (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). There is a huge onus on third-level institutions not only to ensure that students have the knowledge to achieve exemptions, but also the skills and competences to be work-ready and future professional accountancy examination ready. Third-level institutions need to ensure that students develop learning capabilities that can be used for the rest of their professional life rather than just at third-level. This implies that students learning capabilities should extend to the students ability to achieve exemptions from professional examinations (and indeed pass further professional exams).

“The overriding objective of accounting programs should be to teach students to learn on their own. Therefore, accounting programs should not focus primarily on preparation for professional examinations. Students should be taught the skills and strategies that help them learn more effectively.” (AECC, 1990, p. 309).

Third-level institutions are thus encouraged to emphasise the concept of learning to learn rather than just focusing on gaining exemptions. When developing accounting programmes, consideration should be given to instil in students “the motivation and capacity to continue to learn outside the formal educational environment” (AECC, 1990, p. 310). The modern view is that graduates should take responsibility for their own ongoing professional development supported by their employers. The accountant as;

“...an advisory role requires greater ability to deal with uncertainty and problem solving in addition to technical knowledge. This view sees practitioner development as a process of education that emphasises ‘learning to learn’ and long-term practitioner needs.” (Howieson *et al.*, 2014, p. 262).

The AECC (1990) addresses three areas that educators should consider when developing and supporting students during accounting degree programmes. First, the content of the programme should be designed to ensure a sufficient knowledge base is taught. These knowledge bases should emphasise the importance of understanding the underlying principles of the profession and how these principles are applied. Second, the process of learning should build on the students’ ability to analyse, identify and evaluate information to support strong decision making skills as expected by the profession. Third is the development of an attitude and a professional mind-set that encourages “continual inquiry and life-long learning” (AECC, 1990, p. 310).

The difficulty for third-level education is finding the right balance between developing students' professional knowledge and competencies, and providing modules that allow students earn exemptions. The concern is that third-level institutions are more focused on providing exemption-led technical modules. The challenge for third-level institutions is to do this, but also to develop in students the competencies needed for lifelong learning while still delivering modules needed for exemptions.

### *2.2.3 Focus of Accounting Degrees at Third-Level*

Accounting literature from the 1980's emphasised the importance of graduates acquiring technical accounting knowledge (Rebele, 1985). According to the AECC (1990) accounting graduates expect that third level education will provide them with sufficient levels of "general knowledge, organizational and business knowledge, and accounting knowledge" (p. 308) needed for professional life. Graduates of accounting degrees should have both knowledge and skills necessary for further professional development, training and qualification (AECC, 1990; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Hancock, Howieson, Kavanagh, Tempone & Segal, 2009; PAN & Perera, 2012).

Knowledge should provide graduates with sufficient expertise to tackle a broad range of topics without just focusing on accounting issues (Pan & Perera, 2012). Third-level education not only develops technical knowledge but also addresses topics like the impact of organisational structures to complex cultural and economic events (Stour, Borden, German & Monahan, 2005; Pan & Perera, 2012). However accounting students continue to express a preference for learning technical accounting material. They believe that this will be sufficient to "obtain positions after graduation, pass any certifying examination, and lay the groundwork for long-term careers" (St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014, p. 115).

Many studies state that employers believe accounting graduates' technical knowledge is sufficient when graduates begin their training contracts (Gammie, Gammie & Cargill, 2002; Hutchinson & Fleischman, 2003; Mohammed Ehab & Lashine Sherif, 2003; Hassall, Joyce, Arquero Montano & Donoso Anes, 2005; Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Employers feel that much of the technical knowledge is learnt by students at university and if necessary employers are prepared to train graduates in-house specific to their own needs (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). While some literature addresses the adequacy of graduates' technical knowledge, many other commentators question why graduates often lack the generic skills expected of them in the workplace (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

The participants of the Jackling and De Lange (2008) study were asked to consider the importance of knowledge for an accounting qualification, where generic skills were ranked more important by both graduates and employers. These skills were thought to be more closely aligned with career success as "generic skills and job success in accounting are explicitly linked" (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 371). Graduates and employers feel that accounting graduates are often unable to apply the generic skills expected of them in the workplace (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

When graduates were asked about the focus third-level institutions adopt when developing undergraduate programmes, the findings suggest most focus is on technical knowledge, such as accounting problem analysis and accounting skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). This occurs despite research emphasising the importance of students developing the right learning and generic skills (Byrne et al., 2002; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Nearly all technical knowledge capabilities were ranked as more important for prioritisation and development, rather than generic interpersonal skills and oral expression (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Jackling and De Lange (2008) believed these findings illustrate an



over focus by third-level institutions on technical knowledge, at the expense of teaching students the generic skills needed to deal with real-life work scenarios;

“This reveals a troublesome attitude toward the instructional focus of their course as it indicates a perception of deficiency in the undergraduate courses undertaken by the participants and in the area of generic skill development” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 377).

Employers in today’s market expect from graduates not just technical knowledge but “the willingness and capacity to learn and master new knowledge to prosper in the fast changing global environment” (Pan & Perera, 2012, p. 94).

“Employers regard technical skills as presumed in accounting graduates and it is the generic skill development in graduates that are the more veiled quality for employability and career enhancement” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 381).

When employers were asked what the most important graduate attributes were, leadership and team skills were considered as the most important of the generic skills mentioned (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). According to employers the ideal accounting degree should consist of an accounting and business content of at least seventy five percent, with the remaining allocation to a more liberal content (Flood & Wilson, 2008). The aim of providing liberal arts studies in an accounting degree, is to develop in students the generic skills needed for an accounting career through “critical thinking studies, international communication, humanities and psychology”(Pan & Perera, 2012, p. 99).

While graduates agreed with employers on the importance of developing technical knowledge areas such as accounting skills and problem solving, they differed in opinion on others like computer skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Graduates

placed more importance on the development of computer skills at undergraduate level which was not shared by employers. This demonstrates how employers view some of the technical knowledge areas learned at third-level as not as important as what some graduates might think.

Graduates do not always understand that employers are willing to invest in technical knowledge training specific to their organisation's needs. However employers do expect graduates to have the generic skills needed to contribute immediately in the workplace (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Employers are "prepared to provide training specific to their business needs in terms of computer skills and applications" (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 379). When asked about generic skills, graduates feel that third-level institutions focus most on written communication (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Even though employers believe that team skills, leadership, verbal communication and interpersonal skills were more important in the workplace, these were not ranked as important by graduates during third-level education.

Overall graduates and employers were satisfied about the level of proficiency in technical knowledge developed at third-level, but a divergence in expectations existed about the development of generic skills. The study by Jackling and De Lange (2008) identified "a clear gap between graduate perceptions of skills in their university studies and employer expectations" (p. 379). Pan and Perera (2012) believe third-level education needs to reflect the demands of the current market and its employers. Students when graduating should have the right balance between technical knowledge and generic skills that are required in the workplace.

"Universities should accordingly incorporate the market expectations to their accounting programs in order to ensure that accounting graduates are equipped with knowledge and skills required by the market and ready for the workplace."(Pan & Perera, 2012, p. 92).

In the past accountants were regarded as knowledge practitioners who benefited from on-the-job training where the emphasis was placed on tasks and technicalities “command over rules and the performance of routine tasks” (Howieson *et al.*, 2014, p. 262). The accounting profession today is more about the management of information. According to Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) the accounting qualification process needs to do more to support this modern role.

“Within the profession competitive pressures and technology have led to expectations that accounting graduates demonstrate additional competencies with increasing importance given to non-accounting capabilities and skills. (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008, p. 281).

“Accounting academics have an important role to play in maintaining the quality, relevance and attractiveness of their programmes. It is vital to equip students with more versatile skills to enable them to become premier business advisors as opposed to merely custodians of technical knowledge.” (Byrne & Flood, 2003, p. 210).

“As suppliers of business information the international business environment has implication for accountants as ‘knowledge professionals’ helping to drive the business forward.” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 369).

On reflection the literature reveals that third-level degrees place a stronger emphasis on technical knowledge development over generic skills. This occurs despite calls for a broader education that would teach students the life-long skill of learning how to learn. Both graduates and employers believe generic skill development is more important to them than technical knowledge.

While there is agreement on the need for skill development, there is disagreement about which generic skills need to be developed and when this should occur (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Jackling and De Lange (2008) citing the works of Lucas, Cox, Croudace, and Milford (2004), claim that the accounting profession may

need to accept that “generic skill development is a tacit process, developed over life and as such it is best not developed in standalone modules” (p. 373).

However the challenge may not be how the generic skills are built into the programme, but if there is room for them at all. The challenge for third-level institutions is finding the right balance between delivering an accounting programme that provides a sufficient knowledge base, while also developing generic interpersonal skills required by the employer (Wells, Gerbic, Kranenburg & Bygrave, 2009; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017).

“...where universities for their part ‘produce’ accounting graduates to the best of their abilities and within resource constraints. Once students have progressed through their course, employers seek ‘work-ready’ graduates who are able to add value to their business” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 373).

The diverse and multiple demands placed on third-level institutions are difficult or perhaps impossible to manage. According to the literature graduates and employers value generic skills more than accounting students do (Jackling & De Lange, 2008). Students prefer a technical focus because they believe it will expedite qualification and improve their employability prospects (St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014). The challenge for third-level institutions is finding the right balance between developing students’ professional technical knowledge and generic skills, while providing modules that allow students earn exemptions.

### 2.3 Answering the Call for Education Reform

Recent calls for reform stem from rapid advances in technology, globalisation of markets and as a response to a series of corporate failures and scandals (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Byrne & Flood, 2003; Wilson, 2011). These factors along with the changing role of the accountant appear to have intensified the demand for change. Repetitive accounting tasks are often automated and an accountant's worth is measured more in higher order skills such as "critical thinking, problem solving and analytical skills" (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008, p. 282), rather than technical skills. This is important because knowledge modules taught at third-level can quickly become outdated (Albrecht & Sack, 2000) in contrast to modules that develop generic skills such as communication, interpersonal and leadership skills. These skills do not become obsolete and are transferable between industry and practice (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008).

Flood (2014) describes the need for change in the accounting qualification process as the "failure of accounting education to keep pace with the changes in the practice of accounting (gap between what is taught and what is practiced)" (p. 90). It describes the failure of the accounting education system to develop sufficient critical thinking and intellectual skills required of graduates to be work-ready (Flood, 2014). Reform is also necessary to prevent the ethical and corporate failures of the past reoccurring in the future (Merino, 2006; Flood, 2014). The complimentary roles of knowledge and skill development are believed to provide the bases graduates rely on during their future professional career (Cunningham, 2014).

Accounting educators, more than any other stakeholder in the accounting qualification process, are thought to be "in a privileged position to transform accounting teaching and curriculum" (Dellaportas, 2015, p. 447). Some believe that if more liberal arts studies were introduced at third-level then an improved balance between knowledge and skill development could be achieved (Jackling and De

Lange, 2008; Evans, 2014). By introducing a broader-based degree programme, accounting students educational experiences would improve and encourage the development of generic skills (Jackling and De Lange, 2008). Liberalising the curriculum should enable more students to “think critically, question, challenge and communicate” (Evans, 2014, p. 647).

Others believe reform is needed because universities focus too much on exam preparation and pass rates. Third-level students are encouraged to memorise technical facts rather than thinking about how the knowledge is applied in practice. Approaches to learning like this are thought to add little value to graduates’ competencies when beginning training. Students often forget knowledge learnt in this manner (Paisey & Paisey, 2000; Cunningham, 2014; Dellaportas, 2015).

Exemptions are thought to be one of the main reasons third-level institutions focus on technical knowledge (Harvey, 2004). Third-level institutions facilitate exemptions by having “an inappropriate concentration on the technical preparation required to ensure candidates chances of success in their subsequent professional examinations” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 667). As a result exemptions are seen as encouraging passive rote learning. Educators are being urged to avoid creating opportunities where students are motivated by passing exams now and earning exemptions from future examinations at the expense of their broader educational needs.

“Accounting programs should not focus primarily on preparation for professional examinations. Students should be taught the skills and strategies that help them learn more effectively...Students must be active participants in the learning process , not passive recipients of information” (AECC, 1990, p. 309).

Some commentators believe that the content of accounting courses, could be taught using alternative teaching strategies or even outside college (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). Suggestions involve moving “some of the

technical accounting skill educational requirements to the brief of the professional accounting bodies” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 381). Third-level institutions would be responsible for developing a range of generic skills, while professional bodies could train graduates in the “range of technical skills applicable to the accounting profession” through employment based learning (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 381).

Opportunities exist where employers if facilitated, could provide their own work based contributions to the content of accounting degrees. By introducing students to relevant real world practices and experiences, this should result in better qualified and work-ready graduates;

“It is also imperative to build stronger relationships with practitioners and the business community in order to incorporate real world developments and issues into the classroom. Academic programmes that combine academic rigour, professional relevance and educational innovation will hopefully foster interest in accounting and will attract high quality students.” (Byrne & Flood, 2003, p. 210).

Most of the reasons that calling for reform to accounting education address are graduates lack of non-technical skills. These deficiencies at third-level are believed to be caused by the gap between marketplace demands and the emphasis third-level institutions place on exemptions. Accounting students should be discouraged from just memorising facts, earning exemptions and preparing for professional exams during third-level. Graduates of accounting degrees should be capable of dealing with the demands of a modern business environment (Diamond, 2005; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Evans, 2014). Reform challenges educators, employers and professional bodies to find innovative solutions to address these issues.

### 2.3.1 Arguments against Reform

While much of the literature supports the view that continued reform in accounting education is warranted others argue against reform. Reports discuss recommendations for implementing reform dating back many years have not yet been implemented. This illustrates the constant battle for alignment between education and workplace demands (Mathews, Jackson & Brown, 1990; Henderson, 2001; Jackling & De Lange, 2008);

“...educators and universities seem to chase an evolution of systematic change where the educational environment remains at least one step behind employment market needs”(Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 373).

Citing the works of Sin and Reid (2005), Watty (2014) cautions against a handover of power to employers and professional accounting bodies to direct their own accounting education agenda, without academic consultation. St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) agrees and advises against hasty reform. They feel accounting academics have been too willing in the past to accommodate the views of the profession without critiquing fully the impact these changes entail.

St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) criticised reports about critical thinking by Bedford *et al.* (1986), AECC (1990) and Albrecht and Sack (2000). Critical thinking is regarded as one of the most sought after generic skills by graduates and employers (Pan & Perera, 2012; Cunningham, 2014). From an educators' perspective, it is difficult to develop in students the skills required for learning, understanding and critically evaluating information without first developing an adequate accounting knowledge base. Students cannot be expected to think critically about their profession without having the right knowledge (St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014):



“We believe that the primary objective of accounting education should be to develop students’ technical competence. Without being technical competent in accounting, students cannot think critically about their discipline, nor can they communicate effectively about technical accounting issues.”(St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014, p. 114).

If the focus of third-level institutions were to change from technical knowledge content to developing generic skills, researchers like St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) believe graduates will have insufficient knowledge to undertake their professional duties. Graduates will have earned less exemptions and be required to study for more professional examinations while undergoing training.

Many believe third-level students are often too young and lack the cognitive levels needed for critical thinking. This highlights the core issue of the proposed reform, the challenge of developing generic skills at third-level institutions. St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) believe that attempts to reform education have ignored these factors;

“...whether college-age students could develop the identified skills, and whether these skills can actually be taught” (St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014, p. 109).

Cunningham (2014) cited a study by Wolcott, Baril, and Cunningham (2002) which agreed that “most college students operate at cognitive levels that are too low for adequate critical thinking performance” (Cunningham, 2014, p. 408). This suggests that third-level may not be the optimal place or time to develop critical thinking skills as little empirical evidence exists to show which “specific interventions enhance critical thinking skills” (Cunningham, 2014, p. 414). It is thought that a sufficient pace must be allowed to enable students and graduates develop skills over time (Cunningham, 2014). Referring to the Bedford et al. (1986) report, St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) argued that the teaching of liberal arts studies instead of technical knowledge will not necessarily produce graduates with better generic skills.

While third-level institutions and educators are not best placed to deliver all the skill requirements needed for qualified accountants, they should continue to teach the content for which they are qualified. St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) believe that efforts;

“...directed at developing accounting students’ so-called soft skills has been misguided ... accounting educators should focus on what they do best, and on the subject they have mastered, rather than attempt to address subjects that are not in their area of expertise and may be impossible to teach in the normal sense of teaching as we know it”(St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014, p. 118).

Citing the works of Clanchy and Ballard (1995), Lucas et al. (2004), and Cranmer (2006), Jackling and De Lange (2008) argues that it is unrealistic to expect third-level institutions to ensure graduates will have all the generic skills required by employers.

“It is almost impossible to address a whole range of outcomes classified under knowledge, skill, value and social concerns as the intended learning outcomes” (Pan & Perera, 2012, p. 95).

Third-level institutions lack the resources and capabilities needed to teach a broader curriculum (Cranmer, 2006; St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014). Studies by Cranmer (2006) illustrate doubts about the ability of third-level institutions to develop effectively all the generic skills of students within campus based accounting programmes. St. Pierre and Rebele (2014) questioned whether accounting academics “have the expertise to address ethical behaviour, critical thinking, or other soft skills in the manner needed by our students”(p. 110). It is not until graduates enter the workplace that they will be able to develop the appropriate range of skills needed by the profession;

“...academic efforts to teach employable skills are at best producing mixed results and therefore resources would be better utilised in increasing employment based training and work experience for recent graduates” (Jackling & De Lange, 2008, p. 372).

Opinions vary within the literature about whose responsibility it is for the development of knowledge and skills in graduates. Recent research shows how employers expect third-level institutions to develop all of the graduates' skills required in business. Howieson et al. (2014) citing the work of Mulgan (1986) says that employers believe graduates after third-level should be prepared for the practical requirements of the workplace. Any additional training employers need to provide is an unexpected and unjustified expense;

“They expect the universities to turn out skilled and experienced graduates capable of immediately acting as fully-fledged professionals, and with minds uncluttered with general or theoretical ideas. Any time that has to be spent later on practical on-the-job training is held as a cost which the employer should not have to bear and as evidence of the university's failure to provide the right professional education” (Mulgan, 1986, p. 108).

“...that they prefer universities to bear the majority of the costs of educating graduate level accountants while students are likely to be focused on maximising the probability of employment.” (Howieson *et al.*, 2014, p. 272).

Many commentators believe views like these are unrealistic. Third-level institutions cannot be expected to meet all the professional accounting qualification objectives required of them. The demands and challenges of the global marketplace mean the availability of resources in education are already strained. The need for third-level institutions to keep up with this pace of change, make achieving all these goals an unrealistic task (Collini, 2012);

“It is essential that members of the accounting profession, university administrators, and policy makers are realistic about what a university accounting education can deliver. The regular complaints that graduates should be more ‘work-ready’ could imply that expectations may not be realistic” (Howieson *et al.*, 2014, p. 261).

While some universities have responded to the calls for change and implemented some pedagogical reviews, others “have continued to focus on preparing students for technically based exams of local professional accounting associations” (Howieson *et al.*, 2014, p. 261). This leads one to wonder, what areas of responsibility within the accounting qualification process should third-level institutions be held accountable for and where does the duty of employers and professional bodies begin.

## 2.4 Accreditation of Accounting Degrees

As this study examines the value of exemptions, it is necessary to consider the impact accreditation has on becoming an accountant. In this study accreditation refers to the awarding of exemptions to third-level institutions by professional accounting bodies from professional accounting examinations. It enables third-level institutions deliver degree programmes (usually business or accounting degree programmes) where accredited modules earn exemptions for graduates. Accreditation in this sense is “to certify knowledge and understanding of students in a specific area, as a means to exempt from particular aspects of a further qualification” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 654).

In exchange for accreditation, professional accounting bodies require third-level institutions comply with their expected educational standards and regulations. This includes proving that the content and methods of assessment used for the accredited accounting degree modules are aligned with the expectations of the professional accounting bodies (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017).

“Programmes may be accredited for their academic standing or they may be accredited to produce graduates with professional competence to practice, usually referred to as professional accreditation”.(Harvey, 2004, p. 208).

The awarding of exemptions on modules allows professional accountancy bodies influence the resources allocated to that module including “staffing, programme resources and curricula design and content,...teaching process and the level of student support” (Harvey, 2004, p. 209). Individual students earn exemptions on scoring a particular grade on the accredited module of an accredited programme.

“An exemption from a U.K. based PAB examination paper will only be granted if at least 70 per cent of any module contributing towards the assessment leading to the exemption is assessed via a formal examination. This restricts the ability of universities to use more innovative assessment tools (such as group work, student presentations).” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 668).

Citing the work of Harvey and Mason (1995), Harvey (2004) stated that professional accounting bodies [PABs] that grant accreditations are regarded as having three core functions. Firstly, they must safeguard the public interest. They do this to ensure that the activities of associate members of the professional body are compliant with its own views regarding due diligence and competence. Secondly, the professional body must represent the interest of its members as in a “professional association” (Harvey, 2004, p. 212). The award of an accredited status “acts as a benchmark of quality” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 654) to promote consistency and uniformity in the content of accounting degree programmes. Employers and students of an accredited accounting programme can expect that programme to deliver a standard of education and knowledge recognised by the profession. Thirdly, accreditation acts to protect the role of the professional body within the profession “to maintain their own privileged and powerful position as a controlling body” (Harvey, 2004, p. 212). These roles illustrate the strength and value accreditation bestows on third-level institutions, students and graduates.

While the mission set out by PABs could be interpreted as that of “an external guiding hand that knows what’s best and that academia has to conform to it” (Harvey, 2004, p. 214). Some feel that PABs should leverage its controlling powers

to influence and improve the alignment needed between education and training. “Professional accounting associations can assist by informing their members about the realities of expecting universities to be all things to all employers” (Howieson et al., 2014, p. 217). PABs are viewed as having an important role in overseeing the movement towards change in accounting education.

### *2.4.1 Benefits of Accreditation*

Due to the increasingly competitive environment in higher education, third-level institutions are required to compete with each other for student numbers. Institutions offering accounting degrees rely on accreditation to attract students to accounting programmes (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Dellaportas, 2015). Third-level institutions comply with the accreditation process because they believe it provides them with a competitive advantage over institutions without it. An accredited status is much sought after by students, graduates and employers. The ability of students to earn exemptions is used as a “marketing tool to attract the brightest and the best students” (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 659).

“Programme accreditation was not just necessary or a marketing device to get more students but something that attracted better students” (Harvey, 2004, p. 213).

Apostolou and Gammie (2014) citing a survey by Gaharan, Chiasson, Foust, and Mauldin (2007) discussed the influence accreditation has on accounting programme design. Third-level administrators believe accreditation leads to improvements in the curriculum of accounting degrees. The programme content must align with the requirements set out by the professional accounting body to maintain its accredited status (Harvey, 2004; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

“In the context of accounting, professional accreditation is often considered as one of the most important factors in the development of accounting curriculum” (Pan & Perera, 2012, p. 95).

Graduates with accredited degrees benefit from better job opportunities and starting salaries than those graduates of non-accredited degrees (Harvey, 2004). The achievement of an exemption implies a standard of knowledge accepted by the profession. Employers view graduates who have fewer professional examinations to complete during training as a cost saving to them. From an employer’s perspective, these graduates demand less study leave and expense to qualify (Harvey, 2004).

Third-level institutions favour accreditation because accounting departments believe an accredited status is much sought after by potential students. Students believe accredited degrees allow them to reduce the time and effort it takes for them to become qualified. While graduates and employers believe accredited degrees infers that graduates of these programmes have achieved a recognised standard of knowledge and will benefit from better job opportunities.

#### *2.4.2 Drawbacks of Accreditation*

The main disadvantages of accreditation are the control and restrictions it places on third-level educators. The content of the curriculum, assessment methods and teaching approaches used must be compatible with the requirements set out by the PAB. In this way third-level institutions operational strategies are restricted (Harvey, 2004; Pan & Perera, 2012). Some educators become demotivated by the “contested control and consequent inhibition of innovation”(Harvey, 2004, p. 216).

“Accounting educators have been highly critical of the influence that accreditation has on the content and assessment of modules in undergraduate accounting programmes, highlighting the constraints on academic freedom both in terms of curriculum content and patterns of assessment”(Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 667).

Other risks associated with accreditation are that third-level institutions could become focused on satisfying the accreditation requirements of the PABs, to the detriment of the students' needs and the demands of the marketplace (Pan & Perera, 2012). Accreditation prevents institutions making innovative changes that they would like to make to the content or assessment methods of their accounting programmes (Harvey, 2004; Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). The controlling role of PABs described by Harvey (2004) prevents educators creating an accounting degree that aligns fully with students' needs. The relationship between third-level institutions and PABs "represents a power struggle that impinges on academic freedom" (Harvey, 2004, p. 207).

Accredited accounting programmes do not have the room to "develop appropriate skills in students such as critical analysis, research and communication skills" (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014, p. 668). Technical knowledge must be included in the programme, meaning there may not be much room for anything else.

Accounting graduates demand for exemptions means that accounting programmes are designed with a technical focus perhaps to the detriment of developing other skills (Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Paisey & Paisey, 2014). Accreditation means that third-level educators are encouraged to teach and examine technical content such as the preparation of accounts and tax computations, rather than establish if students understand the meaning of the theory being taught (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Students become motivated by exemptions from future professional examinations and will often rote-learn facts to earn exemptions, rather than attempting to understand the application of the theory involved in a real-life context (Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Paisey & Paisey, 2014).



“Facts can be known without being understood, especially where they have been rote-learned, and so it is important that knowledge is internalised by the professional, reflected upon and assimilated rather than merely being regurgitated” (Paisey & Paisey, 2014, p. 675).

The influence of professional exams has led to exemption focused content at third-level, where rote-learning techniques are justified by students wanting to earn exemptions (Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). Students who accumulate a bank of knowledge for exam purposes without considering its application in real-life work situations, extract less value from learning in this way (McPhail, 2001; Saravanamuthu, 2004; Thomson & Bebbington, 2004; Flood, 2014). The emphasis on exemptions is believed to devalue the accounting qualification in the long run (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

The awarding of an accredited status places a significant bureaucratic burden on third-level institutions. Administrators are required to assess, monitor and evaluate modules on an ongoing basis on behalf of multiple PABs. Institutions are expected to identify where incompatibilities arise and make adjustments to programmes if necessary (Harvey, 2004; Duff & Marriot, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). These activities consume vital department time, costs and resources that could be spent implementing more relevant changes. Previous efforts were made by professional accounting bodies in the UK to collaborate under a single collaborative board. This was hoped to reduce the duplication of administration required by education providers in achieving and maintaining accreditation. However these attempts were unsuccessful. Many third level institutions continue to deal with multiple PABs evaluations and assessments along with the pressure of trying to maintain accredited status (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

Pan and Perera (2012) who cited the works of Jackling and Keneley (2009) and Lightbody (2010), believed that third level institutions should not need to rely on professional accreditation to advertise accounting programmes. However financial

constraints within the education sector means that third level institutions believe failure to achieve accreditation will have consequences on student intake. According to Harvey (2004) the marketability of accounting programmes is closely linked to accredited status. Failure to achieve accreditation “would be problematic” (Harvey, 2004, p. 213) for accounting departments.

In Ireland there are potentially four professional accounting bodies offering accreditation to third-level accounting programmes. These are the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), Certified Public Accountants of Ireland (CPA), the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) and the Chartered Accountants of Ireland (ACA). Graduates who achieve the maximum number of exemptions from an undergraduate accounting degree will still be required to complete professional level papers. Even though graduates will have demonstrated an expected standard of knowledge at third-level, pass rates for attempting professional level examination papers remain quite low. For example the pass rates for the professional ACCA papers range from 34% to 50% (ACCA, 2018). The pass rates for CPA examinations ranged from 42% to 60% (CPA, 2018), for CIMA it was 53% to 68% (CIMA, 2018). While the ACA pass rates were higher ranging from 75% to 89% (CA, 2018).

Professional papers represent the final hurdle to cross before qualification, these papers are set at a more difficult, analytical and subjective level. Graduates are expected to demonstrate a deeper understanding of theory and a broad range of technical knowledge, business analysis, strategic and leadership skills in order to successfully pass (AECC, 1990; Byrne & Flood, 2003; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012). Despite accreditation professional exam pass rates remain low. This challenges us to question whether receiving exemptions prior to experience in the working world and being fast-tracked into final examinations mean that graduates are not exam-ready.

Overall the objective of accreditation is to ensure that consistency in quality exists between accounting education and qualification on behalf of accounting students, educators and employers. The difficulty with accreditation is the control PABs have over how accounting education is conducted. This is seen to prevent educators making changes reflective of the market needs.

## 2.5 Need for research

This chapter began by examining what becoming an accountant entails. It discussed how the literature views the roles of education and training and the purpose of exemptions in the qualification process. The importance of students learning how to learn at third-level was discussed and whether or not this is supported or needed during education. Third-level degrees were found to focus mainly on knowledge development. While this is welcomed by students who want to earn exemptions, much of the literature report that graduates lack the generic skills needed to be work-ready.

The conflict between the roles of education and training has led to a sustained call for reform in accounting education. The benefits of teaching technical knowledge or generic skill development were assessed. This highlighted the implications a lack of generic skills has on the work-readiness of accounting graduates. Employers report that graduates are unable to think critically and apply the knowledge learnt to real world situations. The literature attempts to answer what can be done to reduce the gap between technical knowledge and generic skills of accounting graduates.

Even though there are many who call for reform there are others who argue against it. These commentators believe third-level institutions are not an appropriate means for developing critical understanding and generic skills, but instead should continue to focus upon the areas of knowledge for which educators are expert in.

Despite the dearth of literature regarding the role exemptions has on becoming an accountant, this chapter examined the impact accreditation has on third-level institutions and students. It examined why exemptions and accreditation continue to be important to those in the accounting profession. It investigated both the benefits and the drawbacks associated with accreditation.

Finally it was interesting to consider the performance of graduates taking their professional examinations. Despite the availability of exemptions pass rates for professional accounting papers remain consistently low. Accounting graduates continued demand for exemptions means that accounting programmes are designed with a technical focus perhaps to the detriment of developing the other skills needed to be work-ready and professional exam-ready. While the call for reform in the literature focuses on generic skill deficiencies, this failings may be caused by the focus of accounting degrees on earning exemptions. This has led the researcher to the formation of the research objectives, to attempt to understand whether students achieving exemptions from professional exams or graduates who are work-ready, is more desired.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a definition of the term “research”, it explores various research methodologies, before justifying the research methodology chosen for this study. It describes how the researcher reached the chosen research objective, by identifying a gap in the existing literature within this area. It sets out the research objective, questions and the methodology necessary to answer these questions. It provides justification for choosing both semi-structured interviews and online surveys to satisfy the descriptive and exploratory requirements of the study.

### 3.2 Research Objective

Research is the systematic approach used to find out things for a clear purpose. Kothari and Gaurav (2004) referred to the process as a voyage of discovery from the known into the unknown, where the intention is to find out answers to questions. Others similarly see it as a process used to draw impartial conclusions from the evidence collected. To find out the answer to a question, or a number of questions, the systematic activities involved in research can include describing, explaining, understanding, criticising and analysing (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

The research objective is a statement that clearly outlines the purpose of the research project, that is “*what you intend to achieve through your research*” (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 44). The research objective is fundamental to the quality of the research

conclusions it expresses. It forces the researcher to consider, within the area of interest, what it is the researcher wishes to know.

“An explicit statement in the form of a question of what it is that a researcher intends to find out about. A research question not only influences the scope of an investigation but also how the research will be conducted” (Bryman, 2016).

An inadequately formulated objective will lead to poor unfocused research. While a clearly defined research objective will steer and guide the actions taken by the researcher over the course of the study, such as what and how to collect data. This helps to provide clear direction and flow within the contents of the study. This in turn assists the reader in understanding the focus of the research (Bryman, 2016).

The objective of this research is to examine the views of accounting students and recent graduates about what it is they value from an accounting degree, whether exemptions are as important to them as third-level educators believe. This objective was arrived at firstly, due to the personal interest of the researcher, as an accounting graduate, currently undertaking professional accounting exams, and secondly, due to the discovery of a gap in the extant accounting education literature regarding the value of exemptions in becoming an accountant.

### **3.3 Literature Review**

A literature review is a key part of any research. It provides a theoretical basis that enables the researcher determine what is already known about their area of interest and who the main contributors to research in the field are (Bryman, 2016). McCracken (1988) suggests it creates a qualitative analysis of the contributions provided by others in the area. While Nordquist (2017) describes a literature review

as the process of reading, analysing, evaluating and then summarising material about a specific topic .

Knowing the contribution of others allows for the formulation of additional questions about the research topic (Yin, 2003). It also provides the support necessary to justify carrying out the research in the first place (Boote & Beile, 2005). According to McCracken (1988) a literature review should not be seen as a collection of other people's views but as a qualitative analysis of the work performed by others. Creswell (2014) stated the purpose of a literature review is that;

“It provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as a benchmark for comparing the results with other findings” (p. 28).

Once the literature review is finished, the researcher should have a list of areas from which questions can be formed (McCracken, 1988). This process allows the researcher to work at a higher conceptual standard with other peoples' work, and to see how the researchers work contributes to knowledge and meaning (Wisker, 2008).

### *3.3.1 Gap in the Literature Review*

The literature review for this research involved a trawl of academic journals, books, online databases, conference papers and the internet. On review of the extant accounting education literature, it was found that much information exists around the skills developed during accounting degrees and expected of accounting graduates in the work place (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Cunningham, 2014; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). However there is a dearth of literature on what students and graduates value from an accounting degree, whether they value exemptions or what their purpose is in preparing graduates for professional training and examination. This has occurred despite the anecdotal demand for third-level accounting programmes to be positioned

in the education market as exemption-led programmes. The researcher decided to use this gap in the current literature to examine the views of students and recent graduates. This objective was further broken down into key research questions:

1. What do accounting students' value most about the accounting qualification process?
2. When and how do accounting students first learn about exemptions?
3. Should exemptions be given priority in accounting education?
4. Why are exemptions important to accounting students and graduates in becoming an accountant?

### **3.4 Research Strategy**

According to Saunders *et al.* (2016), a research strategy is a plan of action to achieve the research objective.

“A research strategy may therefore be defined as a plan of how a researcher will go about answering her or his research question.”  
(Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 177).

The format of the research strategy chosen must reflect the research question being examined (Bryman, 2016), while also providing guidance as to how the process is conducted. It should describe how the researcher expects to draw conclusions from the research questions asked (Rowley, 2002). The selection of a research strategy should facilitate a reasonable level of coherence between research design, approach, research questions and objectives and not exclude the extent of existing knowledge, time, resources and access to participants and other sources of data (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).



### 3.5 Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods

Adam and Healy (2000) stated that qualitative and quantitative methods are two distinct research strategies used for conducting research investigations. Qualitative research focuses on words and description, quantitative research focuses on the quantification of the data collected (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative strategies aim to understand how all the components of a scenario work together. Quantitative strategies are used to quantify a problem by taking apart the components of a scenario to understand them, by producing numerical data and transforming it into working statistics (Merriam, 1998). According to Kumar (2005) the main difference between research methods depends on the data collection methods used, the procedures used for data processing and analysis, and the style used to communicate the findings.

#### 3.5.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research seeks to explain lived experiences in real situations, using techniques to describe, decode and translate in order to arrive at a meaning and not the frequency of events (Van Maanen, 1983). It attempts to review the activities that lead to a decision. It is often used in exploratory research studies as it is used where both variables and theory are unknown that can lead to a revision of the research question being asked (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative researchers use words to illustrate their analyses of those being observed or investigated. During the process they seek close connections with research participants to enable them to truly understand their views of reality so further theory and exploration can emerge. The approach taken to collect data is typically unstructured. This helps to ensure the information that is derived from this technique

is rich in terms of its relevancy and validity (Bryman, 2016). McGivern (2009) described qualitative research as;

“...less artificial and less superficial than quantitative research and can provide highly valid data. It aims to get below the surface, beyond the ‘top of the mind’, rational response” (p. 162).

Typical qualitative research can include case study research, action research and ethnography where data is collected through interviews, observations, documents, audio and visual material (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell (2014) described how qualitative research encompasses;

“The data collection steps include setting the boundaries for the study, collecting information through unstructured observations and interviews, documents and visual materials, as well as establishing the protocol for recording information” (p. 189).

Developments in information technology have expanded the range of sources of data available that includes emails, social media, online forums and blogs (Hogan, Dolan, & Donnelly, 2009). Interviews as the main method of data collection for qualitative research provides an opportunity to meet the subjects of the study, where the flexibility of face-to-face interactions allows the interviewer to react to and alter the questions posed to suit each individual case (McGivern, 2009). Qualitative interviews can;

“...involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intend to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 190).

The main limiting factor when carrying out qualitative research is the interpretation of data. First, a potential for misinterpretation can occur when analysing data, when the meaning derived from the information collected is taken out of context and misunderstood. The meaning of the data can be lost where the events or words used prior, or post, collection are not included to allow the reader determine the data’s real

meaning. Second, misinterpretation can occur where the interpretive skills of the researcher are deficient. Third, a researcher should recognise the possibility that more than one explanation for a study can be valid, even where researchers share similar research methods (Denscombe, 2003).

Bryman (2016) suggested that the difficulty with qualitative research is that it can be too subjective. This raises concerns about the possibility of a generalisation of findings. It can be difficult to replicate qualitative studies because of the unstructured approach that is often adopted by researchers which can lead to questioning the transparency of the conclusions found.

### *3.5.2 Quantitative Research*

Kumar (2005) describes quantitative research as a “structured approach to inquiry” (p. 12). Typical attributes of a structured approach infers that the objectives, design, sample and questions are all predetermined. How theories arise from use of quantitative methods are described as:

“A theory in quantitative research is an interrelated set of constructs (or variables) formed into propositions, or hypotheses, that specify the relationship among variables” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54).

In contrast to qualitative research, a quantitative approach usually involves a survey of a larger number of participants, where the data collected is subjected to statistical techniques that helps to provide a measurement of the patterns that develop within events. Creswell considered it as a method which:

“...employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys, and collects data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data” (2003, p. 18).

Quantitative researchers are often depicted as researchers who apply measurement techniques to events of interest, that can illustrate “large scale social trends” (Bryman, 2016, p. 401). They tend to adopt highly structured tasks, selected based on their suitability given the intended purpose of the study and when all the research objectives, design and questions are predetermined.

Quantitative research methods can include surveys and postal questionnaires which may result in the researcher never meeting their research respondents face to face. These chosen methods help to protect the independence and objectivity of the study. The data produced can then be transformed into mathematical models, statistical tables or graphs for interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This is then subjected to examination with regard to the concepts and issues that forms the focus of the study. For the data that is collected to be admissible, it is required that the predetermined questions are examined in terms of their validity, reliability and relevancy. The primary objective of the research is to generalise the findings gathered from the study to the relevant population (Bryman, 2016).

### *3.5.3 Qualitative versus Quantitative*

All researchers face the same decision with regard to the research method that will best fit and answer the research questions being asked. It is widely accepted that the research method selected for the examination of any topic depends on the research question being considered. The method chosen should provide the link between the question asked and the conclusions gathered (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

When the purpose of the research is to explain and illustrate a specific scenario, issue or experience then a qualitative approach is necessary. Qualitative research is often more flexible and fluid in its approach than quantitative statistical methods. However, as a result of this it can be argued that it makes qualitative research less worthwhile because it is not governed by clear rules and guidelines (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Where variations that occur in the results of a study need to be quantified then a quantitative analysis becomes more suitable (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Yet if a researcher relies on quantitative analysis only, a potential risk exists that important, relevant and valid data could remain undiscovered (Tellis, 1997). Quantitative analysis is seldom able to capture the in-depth views of the subject, as it tends to focus and rely more on the remote, inferential empirical evidence gathered (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). When textual data is transformed in a quantitative investigation, the objective of the researcher is to understand the views of its participants in terms of their specific social context which can be difficult to articulate. When using quantitative analysis the true interpretation of this rich data source can be lost.

“The reliance on instruments and procedures hinders the connection between research and everyday life” (Bryman, 2016, p. 166).

Hopper, Otley, and Scapens (2001) believe that quantitative research is too narrow, intensely mathematical and of little assistance to complex managerial and social issues that involve multiple complex factors. Bryman (2016) suggests that “the analysis of the relationship between variables creates a static view of social life” (p. 166) where the real meaning of the data can be taken out of its individual context, misunderstood or even lost. In many cases, qualitative methods were developed because of critiques of quantitative methods and research strategies (Flick, 2009). Qualitative research “is good at uncovering the subtleties and nuances in responses

and meanings as result” (McGivern, 2009, p. 162). This is because it tends to be sensitive to the wider context in which it is conducted.

Conversely the qualitative approach may not always be viewed as clearly defined and can be less objective compared to the results gathered through analytical experiments, surveys and questionnaires (Kirk J. & Miller, 1998). However qualitative research can enable the researcher to interpret results and formulate a creative yet valid, reliable and in-depth analysis of the facts it presents. This depends crucially on the skill of the researcher to gather an objective collection of data that will successfully underpin the unbiased value of the information it represents and develops as a result of the study (Adam & Healy, 2000). Neither should the data gathered be suspected as lacking transparency in the manner it is collected (Bryman, 2016) . Under a quantitative study it is the investigator that is responsible for the conduct of the research method chosen, where the qualitative researcher relies on the views of the respondents to guide the direction of the study. The researcher in a qualitative analysis tends to form a closer relationship with the participants that enables it gather a rich and valid collection of data from which theory and concepts can emerge during the process (Bryman, 2016).

The research method selected therefore must be appropriate given the research question being asked. The choice between qualitative and quantitative methods depends on the purpose of the research and the required use of the findings (Kumar, 2005). An exploratory research method requires a significantly effective means of determining what is occurring in a particular setting, it requires an opportunity to pose questions and gain new understandings of incidences in a different way (Robson, 2002). While there are justified reasons for a researcher to use either qualitative or quantitative methods of data analysis as part of their study as they are from two different worlds of thought

“...nonetheless many researchers combine both, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and vehicles” (Wisker, 2008, p. 75)

This particular study is both exploratory and descriptive, therefore a qualitative approach was chosen to better understand and clarify the views expressed by students and graduates to the research questions posed. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out that helped to gain an understanding of the relevant information collected for this study. This was followed shortly afterwards by an online survey of students and graduates to provide further support of the opinions expressed during the interview processes.

### 3.6 Interviews

A research interview can be described as purposeful conversations where the objective is to maximise the validity and reliability of information collected from participating interviewees relevant to the objectives of the research topic (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). It can facilitate a collection of both qualitative and quantitative information, which should enable the researcher to draw comprehensive and sound conclusions (Bryman, 2016).

Overall an interview is one of the main methods chosen by researchers in collecting qualitative data (Kvale, 1996). They are considered cost effective and easy to arrange and require only two peoples' diaries to coincide making scheduling an uncomplicated task. In comparison to other research methods it produces a better performing response rate which means that interviews are often relied upon and preferred over other methods of data collection.

The opinions and views that are expressed throughout the interview stem from one source, the interviewee, thus making it easy to link specific opinions with specific respondents. The researcher only has one person to guide through the interview agenda (Denscombe, 2003). Interviews provide researchers with the opportunity to study complex situations and get instant feedback that enables the researcher to alter the course or focus of the study accordingly (Kumar, 2005). There are downfalls to interviews, they can be time consuming to administer. In particular the transcribing of an interview is considered a major task for the researcher. There is a possibility that interviews can incorporate significant expense when the researcher is required to travel to meet respondents. According to Alreck and Settle (1995), the quality of the data depends on the quality of the interviewer. The response to questions can be interpreted incorrectly if the interviewer is inexperienced. Kumar (2005) said:

“interviewing is time consuming and expensive, the quality of data depends on the quality of interaction, the quality of data depends upon the quality of the interviewer, the quality of data may vary when many interviewers are used and the interviewer may introduce his/her bias” (2005, p. 132).

There are three common interview methods whose use depends on the requirements of the research undertaken. They are structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews.

### *3.6.1 Structured Interviews*

Structured interviews involves the use of a standardised set of questions given to all interviewees, to choose from a standardised set of answers. The aim of which is to reduce incidents of error that can arise, in how questions are asked and answered, while also facilitating easier processing of the information produced (Bryman, 2016). Because each respondent receives identical questions it facilitates an easier and better comparison of the answers received (Denscombe, 2003).



The face-to-face nature of the interview process requires care in how it is handled to ensure that interviewer bias is not allowed affect the quality of the results gathered. Therefore it is necessary for structured interviewers to follow a strict guide, that includes clear explanation of the purpose of the interview, order of questions and listing of answers (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Some would go so far as to suggest that questions should be read out in the same tone of voice (Gray, 2004).

The main advantage of structured interviews when carried out appropriately is the minimisation of ambiguity in respondents' answers. The use of closed-ended questions ensures that the replies given most accurately reflects the interviewees understanding of the questions asked and cannot be misinterpreted or embellished by the interviewer. It reduces the laborious effort in sifting through and ordering data for quantitative analysis and so provides an easier processing of respondents' answers (Bryman, 2016).

The risk of using standardised interviews as a technique for data collection however, revolve around how the characteristics of the interviewer can affect the quality and reliability of the replies received. The current existing evidence suggests it does not facilitate generalisations but it does indicate that misinterpretations can arise due to;

“The interaction between the characteristics of interviewers and the characteristics of respondents; and the interaction between any effects observed and the topic of the interview “ (Bryman, 2016, p. 216).

“Although structured interviews are useful for some purposes they do not take advantage of the dialogical potentials for knowledge production that are inherent in human conversations” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 579).

As a consequence this can result in the interviewee displaying signs of acquiescence, where a tendency to agree or disagree with a set of consecutive questions occurs,

despite the answers conveying a contradictory belief. To resolve this issue, interview questions should be produced in a way that helps to discover which respondents are displaying these characteristics and whose answers can subsequently be removed from the analysis, in order to strengthen the validity of the results that the research relies upon (Bryman, 2016).

Another potential issue is the risk of a social desirability bias, where the answers provided by respondents concur with their desired social status;

“This means that socially desirable forms of behaviour or attitudes tend to be over reported and under desirable forms are underreported” (Bryman, 2016, p. 217).

Further concerns surrounding meaning in interviews arises, where the meaning of terms used in questions assume both the interviewer and interviewee share the same understanding of the terms. However a possibility exists that they may not. This tends to be dealt with in structured interviews by ignoring the problem (Bryman, 2016). Researchers can implement measures to limit these risks where necessary by using self-administered questionnaires, advising interviewers to refrain from becoming over friendly or judgemental regarding the content or context of the responses collected (Bryman, 2016). In conclusion the difficulty with structured interviews was summarised by Denzin and Lincoln (2017) when they described them as;

“...passive recordings of people’s opinions and attitudes, and they often reveal more about the cultural conventions of how to answer questions than about the conversational production of social life itself” (p. 579).

### 3.6.2 *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews pursue a more flexible approach to questioning in terms of context and referencing, where the interviewer has the scope to vary the sequence of questions set in the interview guide and or ask additional questions when appropriate. This allows the researcher to further explore the topic being discussed (Bryman, 2016). The interview guide used can also include some comments to open the conversation, a possible list of prompts and suggested comments to close (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). The importance of recording and transcribing interviews is well known to provide the researcher with the time needed to adequately reflect, draw conclusions and understanding from the interviews conducted (Bryman, 2016). Sometimes referred to as qualitative interviews;

“It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 6).

In qualitative interviews the emphasis is placed on the words collected throughout the interview process, where the researcher works out their own interpretation from the information collected (Bryman, 2016). He stated that the focus of these interviews is on developing an understanding of the participants perspective of the topic discussed “where the initial research ideas are more open-ended” (Bryman, 2016, p. 466).

The key to successful qualitative interviews require careful preparation to minimise the risk of data quality issues. In particular interviewers need to consider and demonstrate to the interviewee their level of knowledge about the research topic, their understanding of the organisation and cultural differences that could affect the quality of the replies received from respondents. These efforts should be made by the researcher in order to defend their own credibility and that of the study. The researcher should also consider whether supplying relevant contextual information

about the research topic to the interviewee prior to the interview taking place, could provide an opportunity for the respondent to prepare for the interview and maximise the quality of the information produced and collected (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

The main advantages of semi-structured interviews lie in the ability to depart from the interview schedule, this helps to improve the interviewers understanding of the respondents' observations and thoughts. It enables the interviewer to use his or her own judgement in asking questions out of sequence or further probing questions that can provide a deeper insight to the participants' views. The flexibility of this type of interview structure allows the researcher to re-evaluate the focus of the research, based on the information gathered during the interview. This ultimately leads to a more appropriate research question (Bryman, 2016). In comparison to other forms of interviews;

“The interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 579).

This method facilitates multiple interviews of the same respondents which helps to clarify further the researchers understanding of the material discussed during the interview process (Bryman, 2016). The use of open-ended questions provides an opportunity for respondents to reply however they wish, in their own terms without the researcher pigeon-holing possible responses because of the need to conform to a structured interview guide. It enables the researcher to explore the complexity of the topic. By supporting the use of unusual answers which may not have been contemplated under a structured interview setting or if the topic for discussion is in an area where the researcher may have limited knowledge. It infers that;

“Respondents' levels of knowledge and understanding of issues can be tapped. The salience of issues for respondents can also be explored” (Bryman, 2016, p. 244).

Yet there are some drawbacks of semi-structured interviews that include the time involved in administering interviews and the processing of the data collected. Respondents are expected to converse for longer in contrast with structured interviews and their use of close-ended questions mean that potentially a much larger volume of data can be collected (Bryman, 2016). Data quality issues arise due to a lack of standardisation, in particular issues of reliability and dependability can occur where the potential for interviewer/interviewee bias exists. Intentional or unintentional behaviours, comments or tone can lead to misinterpretation of questions or phrases of references used. “Cultural reflexivity may be helpful in your preparation” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 399), to help bear in mind the importance of self-awareness, to create a better rapport with the interviewee and therefore minimise the risk of bias. Consideration should be given to the sensitivity of questions asked and the size of the sample group of participants used, these factors can all contribute to an incomplete data collection (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). To minimise the risks associated with these issues researchers;

“need to use a rigorous design and ensure your explanation of how the data were obtained and analysed provides sufficient detail to show your findings are dependable.” (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 399).

Open-ended questions requires post-coding analysis of answers, where researchers examine each interview to determine common themes which provides the basis for codes. The contents of the interviews are re-examined for the presence of these codes that provides a statistical representation of the results. This not only is time-consuming but introduces the issue of validity and potential bias in the coding of answers by the researchers (Bryman, 2016). Saunders *et al.* (2016) said that interviewers must be conscious of their approach to questioning and how questions are phrased to “avoid using leading or proposing types of questions in order to control bias that may result from their use” (p. 409). Qualitative interviews necessitates greater effort, input and cooperation from interviewees. Therefore the

quality and consistency of answers potentially may not reflect fairly the actual views held. Bryman (2016) said a “possibility of variability between interviewers in the recording of answers” may occur (p. 244). Difficulties can arise as a result of writing down answers from respondents or where recording of interviews is not facilitated, a variation between interpretations can transpire.

### 3.6.3 *Unstructured Interviews*

Unstructured interviews are typically the most informal of all interviews, without any predetermined set of questions to abide by. The purpose is to enable the interviewer explore a theme of issues in depth, led by the interviewee’s thoughts on the subject matter and can often be referred to as an informant interview for this reason. Some researchers make formal arrangements regarding a place and time for holding the interview. In other circumstances where a researcher hopes to pursue an action research or ethnographic strategy, these interviews require an;

“...immersion in the research setting and ability to witness and participate in natural, authentic conversations” (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 391).

Unstructured interviews are useful where a study hopes to identify “the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes and lessons of a lifetime” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 125). According to Denzin and Lincoln;

“...the interviewer cannot prepare for a life story interview by devising a lot of specific questions but must instead think of how to facilitate the telling of the story.”(2017, p. 579).

They suggest that the main role of the interviewer is that of a listener, who restrains from interrupting only seeking to ask questions in order to clarify information. Unstructured interviews share many common attributes with semi-structured interviews, especially where the purpose of a qualitative study is to adopt a flexible approach to information collection. The unstructured format suits researchers who

possess only a very general notion of their research area. The end result of studies that use an unstructured approach benefit from these differences because it enables a more “genuine access to the worldwide views of members of a social setting or of people sharing common attributes” (Bryman, 2016, pp. 468-469).

#### *3.6.4 Interviews used in this study*

Despite their limitations, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as they facilitate the collection of a rich and detailed source of data (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003) and the use of multiple interviews allowed for a greater generalisation of results (Yin, 2003). While considered less formal than structured interviews, an interview guide [See Appendices III & IV] was prepared to assist the interviewer during the interview process. This allowed the interviewer the flexibility to alter the direction of the questions during the conversations held with the interviewees which led to more informative and relevant discoveries. It was referred to at the end of each interview to ensure all topics included in the guide were addressed.

A plea for student volunteers was prepared and presented to the current fourth year accounting students in CIT informing them about the study and the need for volunteers [See Appendix I]. In the case of the graduate interviewees an email [See Appendix II] was prepared and sent to a list of recent graduates of CIT drawn up from authorised access to CIT's graduate database. The email set out an explanation of the research and also included information regarding the length of the interview and a broad outline of the questions to be asked. Potential respondents were assured that all data collected would be treated confidentially, a transcript would be sent for approval after the interview and all quotes used would also be anonymised.

Potential respondents replied via text or email expressing an interest to take part in the research. The researcher immediately proceeded to contact these volunteers to make arrangements to meet at a mutually convenient time and location. All

interviews with students were carried out while in the fourth year of their accounting degree and held in CIT, while the graduate interviews were held outside of their workplace at an arranged venue.

All interviews took place in a private, confidential space, which allowed the interviewer to first explain the outline of the questions to the respondent and again seek permission to record the interview. The interview was then conducted. At the conclusion of the interview, the respondent was informed of the timescale it would take to have the transcript sent on for approval. The dates and duration of the interviews are set out in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2.

**Table 3.1 Details of Student Interviews**

<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Student Name</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>
15/11/2016	Interviewee 1	14 minutes
16/11/2016	Interviewee 2	15 minutes
17/11/2016	Interviewee 3	23 minutes
17/11/2016	Interviewee 4	14 minutes
18/11/2016	Interviewee 5	23 minutes
18/11/2016	Interviewee 6	21 minutes
23/11/2016	Interviewee 7	15 minutes
24/11/2016	Interviewee 8	22 minutes
24/11/2016	Interviewee 9	10 minutes
25/11/2016	Interviewee 10	19 minutes



**Table 3.2 Details of Graduate Interviews**

<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Graduate Name</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Professional Accounting Body</b>	<b>Interview Duration</b>
17/01/2017	Interviewee 1	Public Sector	CIMA	16 minutes
17/01/2017	Interviewee 2	Public Sector	CIMA	18 minutes
08/02/2017	Interviewee 3	Big 4	ACA	30 minutes
09/02/2017	Interviewee 4	Medium-size practice	CPA	53 minutes
13/02/2017	Interviewee 5	MNC	ACCA	35 minutes

The researcher transcribed each of the interviews verbatim and the transcripts were sent to the respective interviewees for approval. The transcripts were then edited according to the wishes of the interviewees. Once approval was obtained the researcher commenced analysis of the data.

### **3.7 On-Line Survey**

Denscombe (2003) described a survey as a means to view expansively and at length, the act of “obtaining data for mapping” (2003, p. 6). It provides an opportunity to gather quantitative and qualitative data, from a sample of the population to rationalise, compare or explain opinions, views, attitudes and behaviours (Fink, 1995; Walliman, 2011). The researcher decided to carry out a survey having conducted a series of interviews. This further supports the decision made in this study to pursue an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach by gathering data through;

“...a two-phase project in which the researcher first collects qualitative data and then follows up or builds on this database with a second quantitative data collection and analysis” (Creswell, 2014, p. 243).

### 3.7.1 *Drafting the Survey*

When preparing to survey careful consideration must be paid to the intended target audience so that the survey questions are pitched at a level that will be understood by and relevant to the respondent.

“If your sample is composed of intelligent people who are likely to be very knowledgeable about the topic in question, a high level of complexity is acceptable however the general rule is to keep it simple” (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 199)

The questions prepared need to be clearly linked to the research questions the study sets out to answer. According to Dunsmuir and Williams (1990) researchers should adopt a method of writing up a list of questions first and upon examination, ruthlessly crossing out those which are not important or which duplicate other questions (1990). Similarly to interviews, when considering how to present a question the researcher chooses between open and closed questions depending on the amount of detail and clarity required.

“In open questions, respondents use their own words to answer a question, whereas in closed questions prewritten response categories are provided” (Dawson, 2009, p. 89).

Open questions “allow respondents to formulate an answer in their own words” (Groves *et al.*, 2004, p. 156) as they contain answers that are recorded in full by the respondent (Gray, 2004). Open ended questions can be a crucial tool when conducting a survey. If the respondent feels comfortable about expressing their

opinions, a wealth of information can be provided and as a result a greater variety of information is collected. When used for research purposes open-ended questions reduces the risk associated with researcher bias ensuring that the findings of the study can be relied upon (Kumar, 2005). However the drawback with these type of questions are that they are more demanding and time consuming for the respondent. This can lead to a higher number of non-responses which could impact on the reliability and accuracy of the study.

In contrast closed questions offer the respondent a choice of predetermined answers. They are easy to administer as the data analysis is usually a straightforward task (McGivern, 2009). There are several different categories of closed questions which can be used in a survey. These included line questions where the respondent chooses one response from a given list, category questions where only one response to the question is possible and scale questions where the response selected is a measure of a variable. A common type of scale question is the Likert scale where the respondents indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with a given statement (Gray, 2004).

Despite the benefits of being able to understand and analyse the findings that result from closed questions there is a threat that they may restrict the richness of alternative responses (Gray, 2004). Because a closed questions has limited responses, even if the respondent wanted to give a different response they have no option to do so. There is also a greater possibility of investigator bias because the researcher may list only the research patterns that they are interested in (Kumar, 2005). To try to overcome this, the researcher can place an open question at the end of some of the closed questions. Having an “other, please specify” option would allow the respondent to complete the question accurately if the pre-designed answer was not appropriate. The objective of all question construction is to ensure that care is taken to avoid loss of data in any instance.

“Unless instructions are made absolutely specific, it is almost certain that questionnaires will be returned completed incorrectly resulting in a loss of data” (Gray, 2004, p. 201).

Regardless of the type of questions used, researchers that use surveys as a means of data collection are advised to ensure that all questions used are clear, phrased correctly and instructions are easy to understand. Therefore it is advised that the survey should be piloted as soon as it is constructed (Dawson, 2009) and definitely prior to sending it out to potential respondents.

“Piloting a questionnaire usually helps to eliminate or at least reduce questions that are likely to mislead. But it needs to be understood that people may read and interpret questions in quite distinct ways” (Gray, 2004, p. 189).

It is recommended to ask people who have not been involved in the construction of the survey to read it through and see if there are any ambiguities which may have gone unnoticed (Dawson, 2009). These people are asked to complete the survey to ensure there are no errors or ambiguities and help to work out how long it will take to complete the main survey.

### *3.7.2 Timing and Analysis of Data*

Although the inflow of data from a survey is not instant, it can be obtained over a relatively short period of time. Online surveys allow the option to deactivate the survey link so a survey cannot be completed after a specific date as decided by the researcher. This allows the researcher to cut off incoming data at a specific point. Online surveys also makes it easy to track how many responses had been received and how many more are needed to reach the desired target number of responses. These timings allow the researcher to set a timescale for data collection which can be

useful particularly when it comes to planning research and delivering the end product (Denscombe, 2003). While also beneficial for respondents;

“Respondents can complete the questionnaire at a time and place that suits them. Contrast this with interviews, when it can be difficult to find convenient times to meet the respondent” (Gray, 2004, p. 188).

Once the timing of the survey has been established, preparation for analysis of the data can begin. Online surveys allow for preliminary results to be viewed as soon as they are posted and the data file exported to SPSS (Collis & Hussey, 2009). This is beneficial to the researcher as data analysis can begin immediately and unusual or expected responses detected early. The analysis of closed questions is relatively simple and questions can also be coded relatively quickly (Gray, 2004). It enables the results from the survey to be produced more quickly. There are several techniques which can be used to ensure that the analysis of data is correct. Techniques such as an outlier detection involves examining the full distribution of responses and looking for any atypical patterns or unusual outcomes (Groves *et al.*, 2004). While the analysis of open questions can be more time consuming, they do provide richer detail and a greater wealth of knowledge to the researcher.

### *3.7.3 Advantages of Online Surveys*

The benefits of choosing to deliver a survey online versus a traditional postal questionnaire survey are many. Online products are now available that enable researchers to;

“...create their own surveys quickly using custom templates and post them on websites or e-mail them for participants to complete” (Creswell, 2014, p. 160).

### *3.7.3.1 Online Resources*

Widely available resources online allow researchers use survey tools that help create free short surveys or the opportunity to upgrade and create a longer survey for a fee (surveymonkey.com). Survey Monkey was used for this study. Of course, careful consideration must be given to the structure and design of the survey questions used, and that are needed by the researcher to obtain reliable responses from the respondents selected (Collis & Hussey, 2009). However, once the researcher had determined the detailed information demands of this study, this instrument presented a quick and easy method of formulating the questionnaire and distributing it to the required respondents. An added benefit is that the results produced by Survey Monkey are reported through formats such as descriptive statistics or graphed information.

### *3.7.3.2 Breadth and Flexibility of Coverage*

Secondly, online surveys enable the researcher to access a resource of respondents from an “unrestricted compass” (Bryman, 2016, p. 235). There are no geographic limitations when delivering email or web surveys. This was definitely of benefit in this study when reaching out to recent graduates. Surveys can cover a geographic area much larger than other research methods at a fraction of the cost and time (Emory & Donald, 1991). All the researcher needs is a set of relevant email addresses to reach out to possible respondents. This breadth of coverage;

“...means that it is more likely than some other approaches to get data which is based on a representative sample” (Denscombe, 2003, p. 27).

Graduates were easily contactable by email from the college database, no matter where in the world they were now situated.

### *3.7.3.3 Low Cost*

Furthermore online surveys allow the researcher to deliver surveys to a broader pool of people at a much lower cost. The costs associated with postal surveys, typically postage, paper, envelopes and the time taken to administer the questionnaires (Bryman, 2016) are eliminated. The costs related to a survey are also more predictable when compared with other research strategies (Denscombe, 2003). Other than the time spent acquiring the additional email addresses and sending out the emails, there was no additional cost to broadening the pool of possible respondents in this study. With online surveys there is no cost placed on the recipient to return a response by post. Czaja and Blair (1996) viewed online surveys as the cheapest of all survey methods in terms of both the time and effort involved.

The variety of online formats that can be chosen from when designing a survey, helps to encourage a better participation rate by developing a more attractive and interactive format compared to traditional postal surveys. It is now quick and easy for the respondents to use, understand and complete. In this case an email was sent to potential volunteers with the link to the survey attached, an indication of the time required to complete the survey and a reminder that their responses provided would be anonymised. A reminder email was sent a week later and this encouraged more people to respond. The way the questions were structured and presented created a logical flow and ease of access throughout the survey and reduced the incidence of question skipping that can lead to missing data. A combination of both closed and open-ended questions was catered for. Bryman (2016) stated that when compared to postal surveys, people were more inclined to answer open-ended questions asked in online surveys:

“...that when open-ended questions are used, they tend to be more likely to be answered online and to result in more detailed replies” (p. 235).

The ease of response, at no cost, was considered the most important advantages of online surveys by the researcher and were of benefit in this study to encourage a higher response rate.

### *3.7.4 Disadvantages of Surveys*

The most common drawbacks of surveys are the potential for low response rates from poorly constructed surveys and the subsequent risk of bias if the findings are found to not be representative of the sample.

#### *3.7.4.1 Response Rates*

A response rate can be described as the percentage of a sample that agrees to participate in a survey and how the proportion of participants contributes to the validity of the findings.

“The significance of a response rate is that, unless it can be proven that those who do not participate, do not differ from those who do, there is likely to be the risk of bias” (Bryman, 2016, p. 224).

Many people may choose not to reply to a survey because they do not have time or because they have other work to attend to and simply forget about the survey. The response rate is a difficult issue to overcome when many respondents complain of being overwhelmed by requests to complete surveys by post, online and by phone



(Collis & Hussey, 2009). Questionnaires that are considered too long or complex contribute to low level response rates;

“Unless we can make completing the questionnaire intrinsically rewarding, the response rate can be depressingly low. This is even a danger if questionnaires are too long” (Gray, 2004, p. 188).

The issue of non-responses need to be addressed as this can lead to a bias in the data collected. The research design is based on a generalization from a sample of the population. If there is an insufficient number of responses collected, it is likely that the data won't be representative of the population (Collis & Hussey, 2009). One possible way of overcoming this issue would be to send a follow up request to the non-respondents (Wallace & Mellor, 1988). This will remind the respondent about the survey and may encourage them to complete it. It should be borne in mind that individuals may be more inclined to complete a questionnaire if they know why the survey is being carried out and what will be done with the results.

#### *3.7.4.2 Survey Length*

If a survey is too long, individuals may give up after completing part of the survey and not complete all questions. This usually happens if the questionnaire is taking too much time and the respondent does not know how much longer it will take.

“Questionnaires should be limited in length to four or six pages, otherwise the return rate may be adversely affected. Few people greet receiving a questionnaire with unbounded enthusiasm, particularly long ones” (Gray, 2004, p. 188).

It is also advised to inform the respondent of approximately how long it will take them to complete the survey, thereby reassuring the respondent that they have enough time to do so. Another possible solution to this is to put a progression bar at the top of the survey so respondents can see how much of the survey they have completed and how many questions are left to complete. The use of filter questions such as “If no, go to question 28” can also be encouraging for respondents as:

“psychologically it’s good for respondents to be able to jump sections as it can stop people becoming frustrated by unnecessary or irrelevant questions” (Dawson, 2009, p. 97).

#### *3.7.4.3 Bias Responses*

The importance placed on the care that should be taken when preparing survey questions was discussed earlier when researchers begin to draft a survey. The consequences of poorly designed questions is that it can result in biased responses which undermine the validity of the whole survey, for example if questions contain prestige bias that could embarrass or force the respondents into giving a false answer (Dawson, 2009). This might be the case if respondents do not want to look bad in front of the researcher or possibly because they feel it is the expected behaviour. Questions about income or educational qualifications might elicit this type of response, so care needs to be taken about how this information is obtained (Dawson, 2009).

Surveys should be designed to give the researcher the information they need, yet there can be gaps and distortions in the data which can lead to sources of error. Gray described bias responses as measurements that tend “to be consistently higher or lower than the true populations value” (2004, p. 116). The rate of bias answers obtained is generally higher in mailed surveys compared to interviews (Czaja & Blair, 1996). It can be hard to completely eliminate bias data, but steps should be taken to ensure it is reduced.

### 3.7.5 *Survey used in this study*

The researcher in this study chose to survey both third and fourth year students of CIT and recent graduates who were taking or have completed their professional accounting exams. A survey was chosen as a means of providing further support and analysis of the findings already discovered during interviews from a sample of the same population.

The survey questions were prepared bearing in mind the research questions the study set out to answer and considering the information already obtained during interviews. A combination and variety of both open and closed questions were used and that helped to provide a rich resource of information to support the findings of the study. *Survey monkey* was the tool used to create the online format. Once satisfied with the structure and flow of the questionnaire, the survey was tested by the researcher. These results were examined by the researcher and a senior lecturer to determine if any adjustments were required to improve the accuracy and validity of the survey and to ensure that the answers produced would satisfy the needs of the study. Changes were made and additional questions included.

The decision was taken to not pilot the study as the researcher felt that this would use up some of the guaranteed responses. Having already interviewed both students and graduates the researcher was confident that the questions being used as part of the survey were in line with the information needed to support the findings. Following the test the survey was forwarded to the selected population sample. To acquire a distribution list for this questionnaire the researcher spoke with a senior lecturer in CIT. A list was obtained from a database of the current student population and recent accounting graduates.

When the responses were slow to return, a reminder email was sent to encourage participation by respondents. This enabled the researcher to reach the target of fifty surveys determined from the outset as set out in Table 3.3. A total of fifty three student surveys were collected from a student population of one hundred and twenty, currently studying accounting in CIT. While thirty surveys were collected from a potential graduate population of two hundred and forty. These results were considered a high response rate and representative of the general population, so the risk of non-response bias was not a factor in this study.

All students that participated wish to pursue a professional accountancy qualification and have either secured a professional training contract or intend to do so after graduation. The graduates who participated have completed some or all of their professional exams and are representative of the main professional accountancy bodies, (ACA, ACCA, CIMA and CPA).

***Table 3.3 Profile of Respondents***

	<b>CIT Students</b>	<b>CIT Graduates</b>	<b>Total</b>
Interviewees	10	5	15
Online Surveys	53	30	83

### **3.8 Triangulation**

Bryman describes the role of triangulation as;

“the use of one or more method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that the findings may be cross checked”(2016, p. 697).

Triangulation helps to determine the “validity/credibility/authenticity of research data, analysis and interpretation”, which may encompass a “multi-method quantitative study, multi-method qualitative study or a mixed methods study” (Saunders *et al.*, 2016, p. 207). The use of evidence from multiple sources and methods provides validation of the same facts (Rowley, 2002) which helps to overcome issues surrounding the researchers objectivity (Merriam, 1998; Tellis, 1997). Saunders *et al* described triangulation as helping to ensure that “the data are telling you what you think they are telling you” (2016, p. 730) Bryman concurred with this that the use of more than one approach enhances confidence in the researchers findings (2004). While Denzin described the reason for pursuing this type of strategy is that the;

“flaws of one method are often the strengths of another and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies” (1970, p. 308).

The purpose of triangulation is to provide a flexible method of a comparison of measurements that leads to recognition of better quality conclusions (Brignall & Ballantine, 2003). Bryman described how it incorporates the use of more than one method “within and across research strategies” (2016, p. 386) in order to facilitate the development of measures that instils confidence in the findings of the study. Merriam concurred with these views and said that:

“...triangulation combines dissimilar methods such as interviews, observations and physical evidence to study the same unit” (1998, p. 69).

Because the benefits of triangulation is to reduce the risk of bias or misinterpretation by supporting the validity of the findings and the conclusions drawn, a decision was taken to carry out semi-structured interviews followed by an online survey. The findings for this study were collected from fifteen in-depth interviews; ten students

currently studying their accounting degree and five recent graduates. This strategy helped to capture a deeper and richer understanding of the views of the students and graduates interviewed as part of this study, while providing an opportunity to clarify the information already gathered. The interviews that were conducted were semi-structured in format. An interview guide was prepared and used that included a combination of both closed and open-ended questions. This provided the interviewer with the opportunity to seek richer explanations of the opinions conveyed during the interview process, to find out what the interviewees really think about the questions asked.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This is a qualitative study, exploring the views of students and graduates. Due to the need of descriptive results for this study, a mixed method approach was chosen as the best fit for this particular research topic. Semi-structured interviews were followed by an online survey, used to clarify the impressions and conclusions drawn during the interview process. This chapter justifies the use of semi-structured interviews in order to gather the rich information required, in the form of opinions and views of the students and graduates who volunteered to participate in this study. While the online surveys from a larger sample of the same population of participants provides the validation necessary to support the findings collected previously. The results of the data collected from both research methods will now be seen in the findings chapter.

## **4 Cork Institute of Technology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the context of the study for this research; namely Cork Institute of Technology (CIT). It sets out the mission and values of CIT and describes the academic structure with a particular focus on the Department of Accounting and Information Systems. It outlines the Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Accounting degree programme (BACCT).

### **4.2 Overview of Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)**

Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) formerly known as the Regional Technical College (RTC) Cork was founded in 1973. It is an Irish education provider of both full-time and part-time education programmes across its campuses in Cork City and County.

#### ***4.2.1 Four Campuses***

CIT operates over four campuses, its main campus is located in Bishopstown and covers approximately 80 acres. It comprises the original RTC building, a library and IT building, gymnasium, astroturf pitch, running track and playing pitches. The new administration building, the student centre and the tourism and hospitality building

are the latest additions to the campus along with the Rubicon Centre which is an on-site business incubation centre. The NIMBUS Centre is adjacent to the Rubicon Centre and provides space for up to 80 researchers and undergraduate project students. It facilitates visiting postgraduate students and researchers from other institutions and provides dedicated industry visitor workstations. NIMBUS is CIT's first dedicated research centre and is intended to showcase CIT's own research and ability to translate innovative research into economic benefit ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures)).

CIT Crawford College of Art & Design (CCAD) is located at the Sharman Crawford Street campus and Grand Parade in Cork City Centre. It has been providing education in the arts for over 200 years. Crawford graduates are among Ireland's top artists, designers, media designers and communicators, art therapists and art educationalists ([www.cit.ie/ccad](http://www.cit.ie/ccad)).

CIT Cork School of Music is located in Union Quay, it provides music and drama education, spanning four levels of education. This places it amongst one of the leading conservatoires nationally and internationally. CSM has almost 400 students enrolled in its undergraduate programmes and post-graduate programmes offering MA in Music, MA & MSc in Music Technology and MA by Research. There are over 3,000 enrolments for the part-time conservatory provision of the School ([www.csm.cit.ie/welcome](http://www.csm.cit.ie/welcome)).

The National Maritime College of Ireland is located in Ringaskiddy, Co. Cork and opened in October 2004. It is a purpose built 14,000m facility built on 10 acres of waterside campus. It provides training and education for the Merchant Marine and the non-military needs of the Irish Naval Service (INS). These facilities fully comply with the most up to date international standards and requirements of the School of Nautical Studies, Cork Institute of Technology and the Irish Naval Service ([www.nmci.ie](http://www.nmci.ie)).



### *4.2.2 Students and Staff*

CIT currently has in the region of 12,000 registered students with approximately 2,000 new entries every year. Of these approximately 6,000 are full-time and the remaining are part-time making it one of the largest providers of part-time education outside of Dublin. The student population consists of a wide variety of students including access, evening and continued professional development students. CIT offers accounting students the benefit of small class sizes which assists with the transition from second to third-level education ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures)).

The President of the Cork Institute of Technology is Dr. Barry O'Connor, as the chief officer of the Institute he holds executive responsibility for all staff and overall responsibility for the development and implementation of policies ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/management](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/management)). At present, CIT has 1,425 staff members of which 824 are academic staff. The academic staff consists of 455 permanent whole-time, 136 pro-rata part-time and 233 hourly-paid part-time members. The non-academic staff is composed of technical support, library, administrative and services staff. The non-academic staff members break down as follows: 187 Management, Clerical Admin and Library; 169 Student Services Support, including Exam Invigilators; 86 Technicians; 70 Research staff; and 89 support staff including Caretakers, Attendants and Cleaners([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/factsandfigures)).

### *4.2.3 Qualifications*

Cork Institute of Technology operates under the terms of the Qualifications Act (1999) and therefore all courses lead to an award of a qualification which is fully recognised and conforms with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). CIT is also an approved provider for certain FETAC awards. Awards granted to students are quality assured and delegated by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI),

the Irish national awarding body for higher education. The academic quality system is operated through the Registrar's office of CIT.

The main qualifications awarded to programmes offered by CIT are Higher Certificates (NFQ Level 6), Bachelor Degrees (NFQ Level 7), Honours Bachelor Degrees (NFQ Level 8), Postgraduate Masters Degrees (NFQ Level 9) and PhD Degrees (NFQ Level 10), in Art and Design, Business, Engineering, Humanities, Music, Maritime Studies, Science and Information Technology.

The Institute has obtained valuable additional recognition for its courses by professional bodies. This enhances the professional standing of graduates and provides them with the fullest possible advantages for employment and career development. Many of CIT's courses are certified by professional bodies. Accreditation confers certain professional status and benefits on graduates of these courses, where exemptions are awarded to graduates from certain future professional examinations depending on the grades achieved ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/recognitionofcitcoursesandawards](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/recognitionofcitcoursesandawards)).

#### *4.2.4 Recent and Current Changes*

The Institute completed conversion of all its academic undergraduate programmes to a Modular structure in 2012, alongside adoption of a two semester academic calendar ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/developingcit](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/developingcit)). Each degree programme in CIT has two semesters per annum. The first semester runs from September to January and the second runs from February to May. There are six modules in each semester. In each semester, students are required to study a combination of mandatory and elective modules.

CIT is currently engaged in a process towards a merger with the Institute of Technology, Tralee and the formation of the Munster Technological University (MTU). Resources and structures have been put in place to successfully deliver the programme of change required to make the MTU a reality and the project has received dedicated funding from the HEA to facilitate this work. The MTU Project Office has been established, while project directors and leaders have been appointed. CIT and ITT continue to work together towards achieving a Technological University designation ([www.cit.ie/currentnews](http://www.cit.ie/currentnews)).

### **4.3 Mission and Values of Cork Institute of Technology**

CITs mission sets out the organisations values and intentions, what it does and how it can best serve the interests of its students, staff and key stakeholders. CITs mission (which is currently under review) is:

“To provide student-centred career-focused education and research for the personal, professional and intellectual development of the student and for the benefit of the broader society in the region and beyond.”

CIT is committed to its role within the region and nationally, as it pursues its mission across a full range of activities. The institute is focused on fulfilling the following commitments which encapsulate the Institute’s priorities, ethos and values:

- CIT is a student-centred institution
- CIT delivers career-focused education and research
- CIT provides inclusive access to higher education
- CIT plays a regional, national and international role

CIT has pledged to pursue an ambitious and challenging vision for the strategic development of the institute. The strategic goals set by CIT are aligned with the broader national educational goals outlined in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Finally as CIT considers its future position its intention is that:

“CIT will be an internationally recognised centre of excellence in the provision of career-focused education which produces effective, ethical professionals capable of entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity.”  
([www.cit.ie/contentfiles/president/English-CIT%20Annual%20Report%202014\\_2015.pdf](http://www.cit.ie/contentfiles/president/English-CIT%20Annual%20Report%202014_2015.pdf)).

#### **4.4 Structure of CIT**

CIT has a faculty based academic management structure of which there are two constituent faculties: Engineering & Science and Business & Humanities. Each of these faculties is made up of a number of schools which are each made up of two or more academic departments ([www.cit.ie/aboutcit/management](http://www.cit.ie/aboutcit/management)).

##### ***4.4.1 Engineering and Science***

The Faculty of Engineering and Science comprises of the School of Building and Civil Engineering, the School of Mechanical, Electrical and Process Engineering and the School of Science and Informatics. The School of Building and Civil Engineering contains the Department of Architecture, the Department of Civil, Structural and Environmental Engineering and the Department of Construction. The School of Mechanical, Electrical and Process Engineering contain the Department of Mechanical, Biomedical and Manufacturing Engineering, the Department of Process, Energy and Transport Engineering, the Department of Electrical and Electronic

Engineering and the Centre of Craft Studies. The different departments under the School of Science and Informatics are the Department of Applied Physics and Instrumentation, the Department of Biological Science, the Department of Chemistry, the Department of Mathematics and the Department of Computing ([www.cit.ie/contentfiles/Handbooks/Handbooks%20Entry%202017/cit-prospectus-entry2017.pdf](http://www.cit.ie/contentfiles/Handbooks/Handbooks%20Entry%202017/cit-prospectus-entry2017.pdf)).

#### ***4.4.2 Business and Humanities***

The Faculty of Business & Humanities comprises of the School of Business and the School of Humanities. The School of Business comprises of four different departments: The Department of Accounting and Information Systems, the Department of Marketing and International Business, the Department of Organisation and Professional Development and the Department of Management and Enterprise. The Department of Applied Social Studies, the Department of Sport, Leisure and Childhood Studies, the Department of Tourism and Hospitality and the Department of Education Development are the four departments of the School of Humanities ([www.cit.ie/contentfiles/Handbooks/Handbooks%20Entry%202017/cit-prospectus-entry2017.pdf](http://www.cit.ie/contentfiles/Handbooks/Handbooks%20Entry%202017/cit-prospectus-entry2017.pdf)).

#### **4.5 Department of Accounting and Information Systems**

The School of Business is one of the schools in the Faculty of Business and Humanities of which the Department of Accounting and Information Systems is the focus of this study. This department offers undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Accounting, Information Systems, Agriculture and Horticulture. This study focuses on the Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Accounting programme. At the time of this study the researcher was a student of the Masters of Business (Research) in the Department of Accounting and Information Systems and employed as a tutor in CIT.

## 4.6 Bachelor of Business in Accounting Degree in CIT

The Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Accounting (BACCT) is a four-year *ab initio* degree programme. Students can pursue this degree via two routes. Students that are sure they want to pursue a career in accounting may choose the accounting stream from the outset, entering CIT through the Bachelor of Business (Honours) in Accounting (Level 8). Those students who are unsure about whether accounting is the most appropriate field of study for them, can begin their studies through the Bachelor of Business Studies programme (Level 7).

At the end of second year, students choose between joining the accounting, management and marketing streams of the ordinary degree programmes. From third year students who elect for the accounting stream enter third year of the BACCT programme.

The Bachelor of Business in Accounting programmes offers students an excellent range of exemptions from the professional accounting bodies (e.g. Chartered Accountants of Ireland, Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and Certified Public Accountants). This allows students who achieve the desired grades in modules accredited by the relevant professional accounting bodies, to reduce the number of professional accounting examinations needed to be completed after graduating from CIT. This study seeks to explore the value of these exemptions to accounting students and graduates as part of the process of becoming an accountant.

In 2015/16 CIT's Bachelor of Business (Hons) in Accounting degree underwent a programmatic review, as it does every five years. The major change from that review was the introduction of work placement. This change would bring the accounting programmes of CIT in line with the provision of work placement opportunities

provided by other programmes run by the School of Business. Although work placement was considered important, the department was keen to ensure that its inclusion did not reduce the number of exemptions earned from the programme. Exemptions were still seen as important to the department, lecturers, students and graduates ([www.cit.ie/course/CR400](http://www.cit.ie/course/CR400)).

During the second semester of the third year in accounting programmes, CIT students now have the option to undertake a relevant work placement of at least 15 weeks in duration. Work placement programmes help students to familiarise themselves with work practices and observe the practical application of theoretical knowledge gained during their degree. The placement is supported by a member of academic staff in CIT together with a workplace coordinator. Placement introduces the student to structured employment in a relevant accounting environment and to develop the skills and an understanding of organisational structures, culture, procedures and technologies.

Graduates of accounting degrees in CIT have secured employment within accountancy practices and as accountants in industry, the banking and finance sector or teaching and lecturing. In the past graduates have worked with the “Big 4” accountancy firms (PwC, KPMG, EY and Deloitte) along with medium and small accountancy firms. Industry employers have included Apple, Dell EMC, Dairygold, Kerry Group, Quintas, Musgrave Group, South Western Services (SWS), Financial Control Outsourcing Services (FCOS), PepsiCo, Bank of New York Mellon, and State Street Bank ([www.cit.ie/course/CR400](http://www.cit.ie/course/CR400)).

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter began with an overview of CIT, the focus of the study for this research. The chapter stated the mission and vision of CIT and briefly outlined the organisational structure of CIT. As the mission focuses on providing student centred and career-focused education for students, exemptions continues to be an important consideration for the Department of Accounting and Information Systems when selecting the range of modules to be included in the Accounting Degree programmes provided by CIT. This is seen as one of the ways in which CIT can fulfil its mission. The chapter also outlines the two constituent faculties within CIT, Engineering and Science and Business and Humanities. It concludes by describing the Bachelor of Business (honours) in Accounting degree and the continued need for exemptions alongside the introduction of work placement for students.



## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

In Ireland the majority of those wishing to become an accountant pursue a dual process of education. This consists of completing a degree in college followed by a training contract combined with professional examinations. Accounting students in CIT begin their accounting education by studying an Honours Bachelor Degree programme (Bachelor of Business (Hons) in Accounting). This programme offers some accredited modules where students who achieve a specified grade are entitled to exemptions from future professional examinations. The accounting degree provided by CIT is very much exemption-led.

This study set out to examine the value of accounting degrees to students and recent graduates. It investigates the role of third level education in becoming an accountant with a focus on the value of exemptions. It examines what is important to accounting students during third level education and after graduation. It investigates how earning exemptions during third-level affects the transition from education to training and studying for professional exams. It also considers how important students and graduates think employers rate exemptions when recruiting graduates.

The findings in this chapter examine fifteen in-depth interviews; ten current students from CIT's honours bachelor accounting degree and five recent graduates of the same programme. These findings are supported by information obtained from a student and graduate online survey: fifty-three respondents were from current students and thirty respondents from graduates of the accounting programme over the past four years.

## 5.2 Third Level Education

The study first set out to understand what it was students and graduates value from an accounting degree in becoming an accountant and what part exemptions play if any in this process.

### *5.2.1 Achievement of Exemption as motivation to do well*

The aim of this study set out to explore the role of third-level education in becoming an accountant, whether students even want exemptions or is being work-ready more important. However it was during these initial interviews with students, that they began to speak about the importance of getting good results during college to secure employment and get exemptions. The students interviewed stated that they were motivated to work hard in order to achieve a good result in their degree. Most of them had set a target of achieving a 2H1 result (that is an overall average of greater than 60%) in their degree. This was of particular importance to students that had already been offered a graduate contract in an accountancy firm. They had been told that their offer was made on condition that they achieved a 2H1.

“We need to get a 2.1 to get into any of the firms, and the fact that most of us have contracts under our belts at the moment, means that we have to get a 2.1 in order to sustain that contract” (Student Interviewee 2).

“I have a contract already but the minimum is a 2.1 and I am obviously aiming for the highest I can get, so that is my main motivating factor” (Student Interviewee 2).

As part of this conversation, the students themselves then started to speak about the significance of getting a particular result in order to avail of exemptions.

“We have to get at least a 2.1, so we just need to get good results and get all the exemptions” (Student Interviewee 6).

These conversations began to illustrate what it meant to them to avail of all of the exemptions on offer. They were showing a strong preference for getting each available exemption rather than having to do the professional exam after graduation. In fact they were prepared to repeat a college exam in the autumn sittings (through qualifying exams) to achieve the required grade for the exemption, rather than having to do the professional exam. Students believe it is easier to do these exams now while not having a full time job, others felt it was just about having less to do later on:

“I think it is a lot easier to do them in college than doing professional exams. ....I don't want to be doing exams when I'm working” (Student Interviewee 3).

“I think exemptions are a huge thing, I know from first year I don't have one of the exemptions so I am looking to go back and repeat that exam in August” (Student Interviewee 10).

“It doesn't matter about working, it's just to get the exams out of the way as quickly as possible” (Student Interviewee 6).

“I put my head down studying, just really focusing on getting over 50%” (Student interviewee 1).

“I am thrilled I don't have to do these exams again. I only have about five more exams to do to become qualified. It is an awful weight off my shoulders.” (Student Interviewee 5).

In this way exemptions help to motivate students to do well and to work hard while in college. They are seen as an opportunity to secure important professional milestones while still at college. Because it was the students that instigated this conversation about exemptions, it began to indicate to the researcher what students knew about exemptions and their importance to them.

Graduates shared a similar view of needing to perform well in college in order to get the professional exams “out of the way” (Graduate Interviewee 2). Similar to the current students, they had repeated exams in college to avail of exemptions, instead of having to do the professional exam.

“I compensated one module in first year and in third year I realised I needed to repeat this module to get the grade needed for the exemption” Graduate Interviewee 4).

One of the graduates interviewed chose not to do an exemption-bearing module when she was in college and regretted this decision. She wished she had picked the module as it would have saved her a lot of time and effort if she had got the exemption while at college.

“If I got an Audit exemption at college I wouldn’t have wasted two years and three sittings trying to pass that professional paper. It was very demotivating, costly and it took me a long time to get off the ground really.” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

The desire to get as many exemptions as possible before getting into the workplace was prominent throughout the interviews with both students and graduates. This prompted the need for a further investigation of the value of exemption and to question why students thought third-level education was a better time to get these modules “out of the way” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

### *5.2.2 Influence of Exemptions on Course Content*

As the accounting degree in CIT is a four year programme, there is plenty of room on the programme for a mix of exemption bearing and non-exemption bearing modules. So Financial Accounting, Management Accounting, Tax, Financial Management modules are accompanied by modules such as Management, Marketing, MIS, Economics and Business Mathematics.

The graduates interviewed were satisfied with the value of this mix of accounting and non-accounting content. They spoke about their appreciation of the breadth of modules studied when starting their professional role. Graduates saw how some modules, which were not bearing exemptions, had assisted them in gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of the business world. They specifically mentioned Economics, MIS and Management as helping them in the day-to-day work they were doing as accountants.

“I wanted to go down the auditing route, but to do that I didn’t realise that I would need to understand products properly, the production process, and the management of the organisation. These were as important as just getting the exemptions” (Graduate Interviewee 4).

“I thought it was a great option to do other business modules. If you do an accounting degree you have a good business background.” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“I think the modules we had here [in CIT] are very beneficial....The modules that I thought were irrelevant, like IT, have actually been very relevant. That is what you find out when you start working. I didn’t realise the importance of IT when I was in college” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

The final quote above summed up the sentiment of the other graduate interviewees. Modules that, when they were students, they thought would be irrelevant in the accounting profession, had in fact been very useful.

Graduates did feel that perhaps it is in the first two years of the degree that a broad range of business modules should be included in the programme. They felt that the final two years was the time to focus more on accounting modules.

“...your broad education is at the start when you are doing general business and you want to do things like behavioural science. By the time you get to 3<sup>rd</sup> year you should know whether you want to be focused on accounting or not” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

Two graduate interviewees went further and suggested that perhaps an additional module preparing students for the workplace should be added towards the end of the degree programme. One mentioned, for example, the inclusion of interview preparation techniques on the programme. This view was shared by another graduate who felt that accounting graduates often display a lack of interpersonal skills and perhaps college should better prepare students for the workplace. That being said, these interviewees were quick to emphasise that these modules should *not* be put on the programme *instead* of or at the expense of exemption bearing modules.

“There were modules like that in second and third year that didn’t have any exemptions. It sounded great and interesting but what benefit would it have given me in the long run” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“College could prepare you a bit more for the workplace, but I wouldn’t do it at the expense of your education, and by that I really mean exemptions” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

As is evident from the quotes above and the conversations held with them, graduates while happy to suggest changes to the programme, felt it should not be at the expense of exemption bearing modules.

As well as being satisfied that some accounting modules gave them exemptions, graduates were also happy that some modules in their final year prepared them well for further professional exams. When it came to studying for their first professional exams, they felt that they had already covered a lot of the content. Graduates found having focused on exemption-led technical knowledge, their initial experience with professional exams was better than they expected. Therefore even though they did not have the exemption for these exams, they were already partially prepared for it.

“I had covered some stuff in college that was appearing on my first CIMA exam. So you are getting good knowledge before you even study or sit your professional exams” (Graduate Interviewee 4).

“When we did the CAP2s last year I’d say we had very little new material in some subjects like Tax and Financial Management. That was a great help. I was confident going into the exam” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

When comparing his college experience with that of his colleagues at work, one graduate found that he had more exemptions and less new material to study when preparing for CAP2 exams;

“Compared with [graduates from other colleges in this firm], they had a lot of new material to cover compared to us. I was happy with that. If you know the basics well you will definitely get through, I used a lot of college notes and materials for my professional exams” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

Even though the graduates seemed happy to talk about the benefits of non-exemption bearing modules, they still wanted a programme that was focused primarily on getting exemptions and preparing them for future professional exams.

In comparison to the graduates, the majority of students interviewed (7/10) were not happy with the mix of content on the programme. Instead of believing non-exemption bearing modules will prepare them for the business world, students saw these modules as “irrelevant” (Student Interviewee 8), and should therefore not be in an accounting degree programme. It is interesting that MIS is one module that students see as irrelevant and yet this is one of the modules that the graduates had found relevant.

“There was one subject Management Information Systems, a lot of the stuff we cover we will never use when it comes to working in an accountancy firm, so a lot of us just were not motivated by it” (Student Interviewee 9).

“We had two years of Management Information Systems and Business Information Systems, we felt we were just repeating the content we did last year and I just thought that was a waste of time” (Student Interviewee 2).

“I felt MIS was useless, we did BIS in second year most of it is common sense so I would actually prefer if we did other modules like auditing, tax, law.” (Student Interviewee 3).

“For the first two years we did Marketing modules, it wasn’t too bad it does feed into the whole accounting and business field but maybe we had too much of it” (Student Interviewee 2).

Even though some could see that perhaps there would be a benefit in having some other modules, just like the graduates interviewed, they would not be in favour of replacing modules that earned exemptions.

“I think doing something like management and MIS could be beneficial if you wanted to get into a firm and eventually go into management in the firm. But for now it is accounting that I want. Most of the class want that” (Student Interviewee 9).



“Modules that show you stuff for the workplace to make it less daunting would be good. But I like the exemptions I have now and it is what I really want to do anyway” (Student Interviewee 4).

All ten students interviewed stated that they would not like to see any of the exemption-bearing modules replaced by any other module, even if it was a module that would make students more work ready.

“For me I would rather get more exemptions” (Student Interviewee 7).

“I wouldn’t [replace exemption-bearing modules] because when I do go on to do professional exams at some stage they will be very handy to me” (Student Interviewee 1).

“No I wouldn’t be in favour of [replacing exemption-bearing modules], my primary goal is to get a job” (Student Interviewee 5).

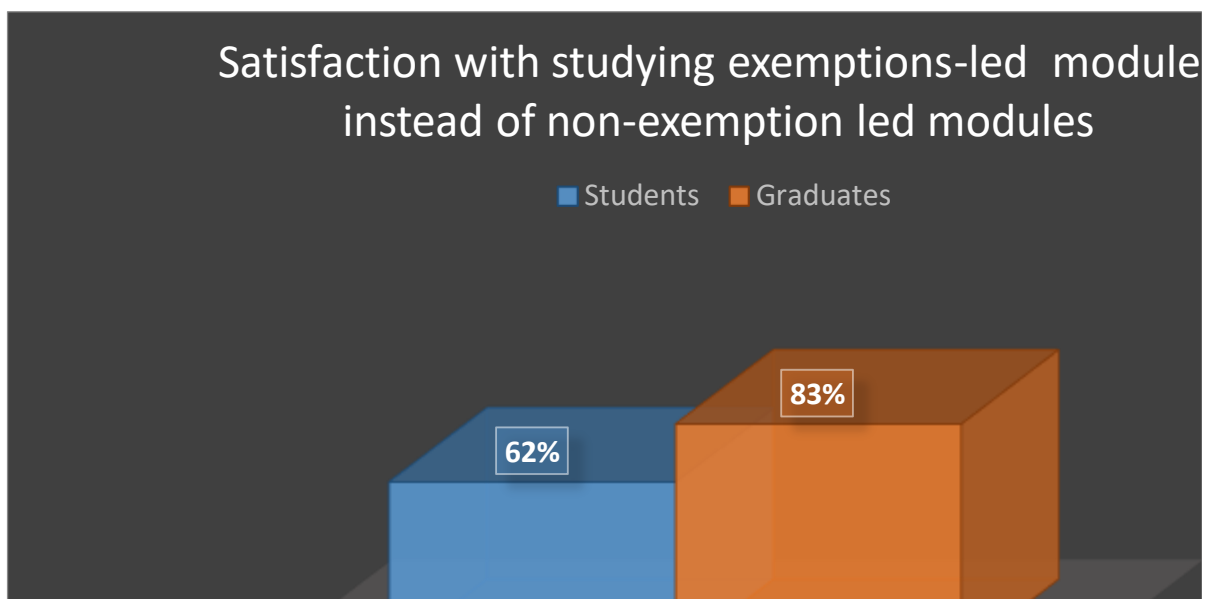
“It would bother me if modules were replaced. It’s the fact that I am exempt from all CAP1 exams and chartered exams that is what I want. I don’t want to be waiting ages to get on with it” (Student Interviewee 4).

“Most people want to get exemptions. They don’t care about the other modules because you can always learn the other ones online or through other sources, but to get these exams is more important.” (Student Interviewee 3).

“I feel that if someone is really sure that accounting, it is what they want to do, then this course is ideal, because you are going about your accounting course and you are getting your exemptions” (Student Interviewee 1).

Opinions about degree content were also sought in the survey as shown in Figure 5.1 below. 83% of graduates and 63% of students described being satisfied with studying exemption-led modules during their accounting degree. The researcher felt that this indicated how graduates who are engaged with, and understand the expectations of the workplace appreciate the technical focus of their accounting degree more. Students who haven't yet begun their training contracts perhaps find it more difficult to place a value on exemptions. This also reflects the students' uncertainty about what the transition from college to professional exams will involve. Students do not yet have the same understanding of the “*diversity of requirements of an accountant*” (Graduate Interviewee 4) in the workplace and during professional examinations.

**Figure 5.1 Studying exemption bearing instead of non-exemption bearing modules**



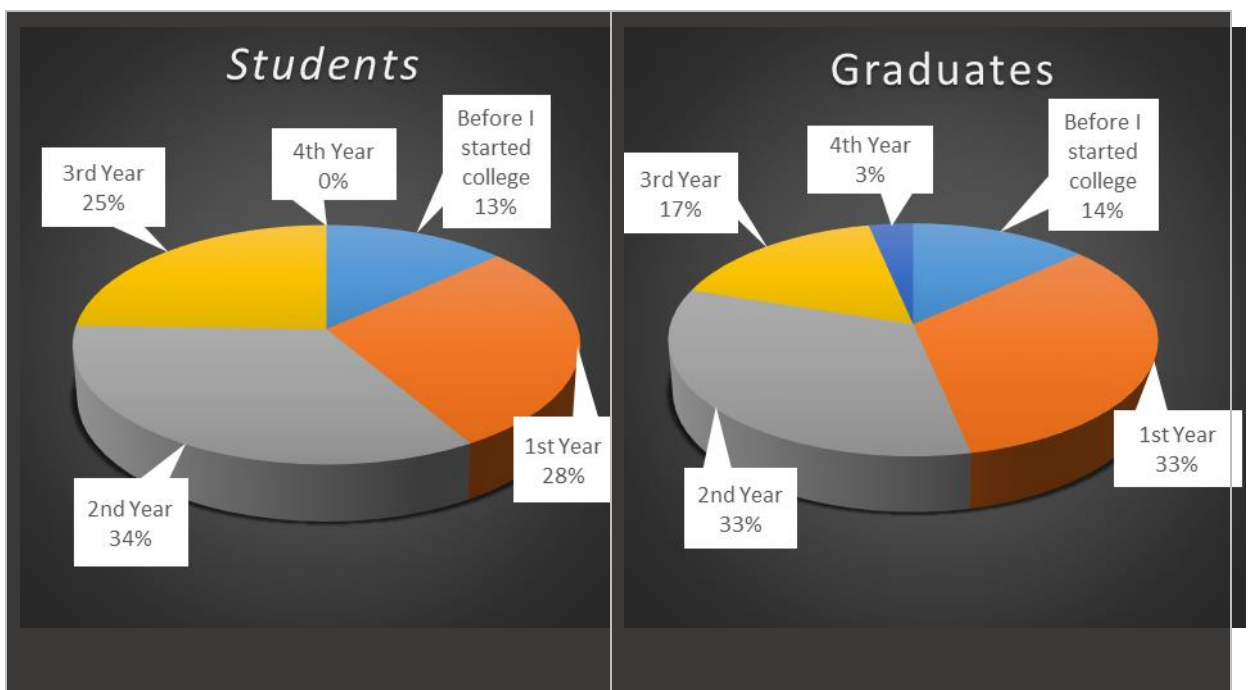
Overall the participants in this study seem to be in agreement that modules relevant to professional exams are the most valued element of the accounting degree programmes. Maximisation of exemptions and preparation for future professional exams are their priority.

### 5.2.3 Understanding Exemptions

During the course of the study it became evident how important exemptions were to students and graduates of accounting degrees. It was obvious from the opinions expressed that the accounting programme in CIT being an exemption-led programme was important to them. Given this information, the researcher wanted to determine if exemptions were the reason why students had chosen this particular programme. To do this, the researcher needed to understand when and how students first heard about exemptions.

To begin both students and graduates were asked when they first heard about exemptions. What was surprising about this was that only up to 14% of the respondents surveyed knew what exemptions were before starting college. See Figure 5.2 below presenting the results of the survey.

**Figure 5. 2** When respondents first heard about exemptions



Only two of the students who participated in interviews were attracted to the programme in CIT due to the exemptions it offered:

“The number of exemptions is what attracted me to do this course. I think there is always going to be competition between campuses to try and attract the best students.” (Student Interviewee 2).

All other interviewees only discovered about the existence of exemptions while in college and became more aware of the exemptions their programme offered, before going into their final year of college.

“I didn’t go into CIT thinking I am doing accounting and I need exemptions” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“No I had no idea about exemptions [before college] until about second year” (Student Interviewee 10).

“I only heard about exemptions when I came to CIT first day” (Student Interviewee 7).

“I didn’t even know you had to go on to do professional exams it was after I started at college and the lecturer said that when you graduate your degree is not a professional accounting qualification” (Student Interviewee 3).

These quotes show that the majority of students do not know about exemptions before beginning college. Exemptions are not a factor when students choose which course to pursue when becoming an accountant. It indicated to the researcher that accounting students are not coming to college to earn exemptions but to study accounting. Students before beginning third-level, have a difficulty accessing relevant career information and therefore an understanding about what becoming an accountant actually entails. Even students who had known about exemptions before applying to college, did not really know what they were;

“I knew there was exemptions but I didn’t really understand the CAP1s and CAP2s until maybe second or third year which is quite late. It wasn’t talked about a lot until I suppose third year” (Student Interviewee 2).

It is in first year and second year that most students first hear about exemptions, but again they didn’t appreciate what they meant until they were looking for graduate positions in fourth year. Some interviewees admitted that while they may have heard about exemptions earlier during college, it was not until fourth year or after college that the actual real implications of exemptions were fully understood.

“Yes I had heard of them but I just didn’t take any notice of them until third year. They kept talking about them and then I really thought that I better start getting 50% in my modules” (Student Interviewee 1).

“Only this year really [fourth year] because I wasn’t ready for it up until then” (Student Interviewee 5).

Both student and graduate interviewees described finding out about the role of exemptions in fourth year as too late in their education cycle. All the respondents felt that if they had known earlier about exemptions, they would have put more effort into insuring that they maximised the number of exemptions they earned while in college.

“I didn’t know that if you didn’t get certain marks in certain subjects, you didn’t get exempt from them until much later in the course” (Student Interviewee 6).

“I suppose for the first three years I didn’t really work as hard because I didn’t think it was going to be taken into account but now I know I was wrong. I wished I actually worked harder because this year I want to get a 1.1.” (Student Interviewee 3).

“It was very vague with me until after college. We would have been told about it in college but when you hear from four accounting bodies, it is an awful lot of information to take in.” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“I found out about exemptions very late in the programme. If I understood earlier it would definitely have affected my study and my results” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“Definitely in first and second year of college I knew nothing about exemptions. I knew what the accounting bodies were but I didn’t know that my exams [in CIT] were going to help” (Graduate Interviewee 4).

Graduate interviewees further explained that despite hearing about exemptions at an early stage in college, they did not fully appreciate how their value could impact on the process of them becoming an accountant. They did not understand that exemptions reduced the number of professional exams needed to be completed after graduating and how this would impact on how they would balance work and study.

Because different accountancy bodies offer different exemptions from professional examinations, this further adds to the confusion about exemptions. Students experience a difficulty differentiating between professional accounting bodies and how their exemptions will impact on them personally. Some graduates feel it was not fully understood by them until they began their professional careers. Graduates felt that when they were students they ignored the issue of professional exams until they secured their training contract. It was not until then that most got their first job and selected the accountancy body that they were going to study with;

“With ACCA, CPA and Chartered you don’t know what you want to do as a third year student. It is only when you get a job, you know which one you are going with, it’s then that you look at the exemptions” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“You are trying to pass the thing first of all, to get on to the next year of college and then if you have to think of exemptions, that is too much pressure. I didn’t realise which modules gave me which exemption with which body” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

As part of this discussion it was revealed *how* accounting students actually learned about exemptions initially. It was found that the majority of students (78%) and graduates (73%) first heard about exemptions from lecturers. This illustrated how students rely heavily on their lecturers to provide them with relevant information about their professional career.

“It was in first year we were in a lab and we had to do a presentation for a lecturer, we had to pick any professional [accounting] body and find out information about it” (Student Interviewee 6).

“I suppose all our lecturers were coming from different backgrounds and you would hear their personal stories. It gave an insight of what direction professionally you could go” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

After this, 11% of students and 4% graduates heard about exemptions from other students. Only 9% of students and 4% of graduates claim to have first heard about exemptions from family and friends. While only 2% of students and 8% of graduates first heard from career guidance counsellors. These findings about how accounting students begin to understand about exemptions are reflective of the earlier findings, where just 14% of respondents had heard about exemption before beginning college. The interviewees described their own personal experiences as;

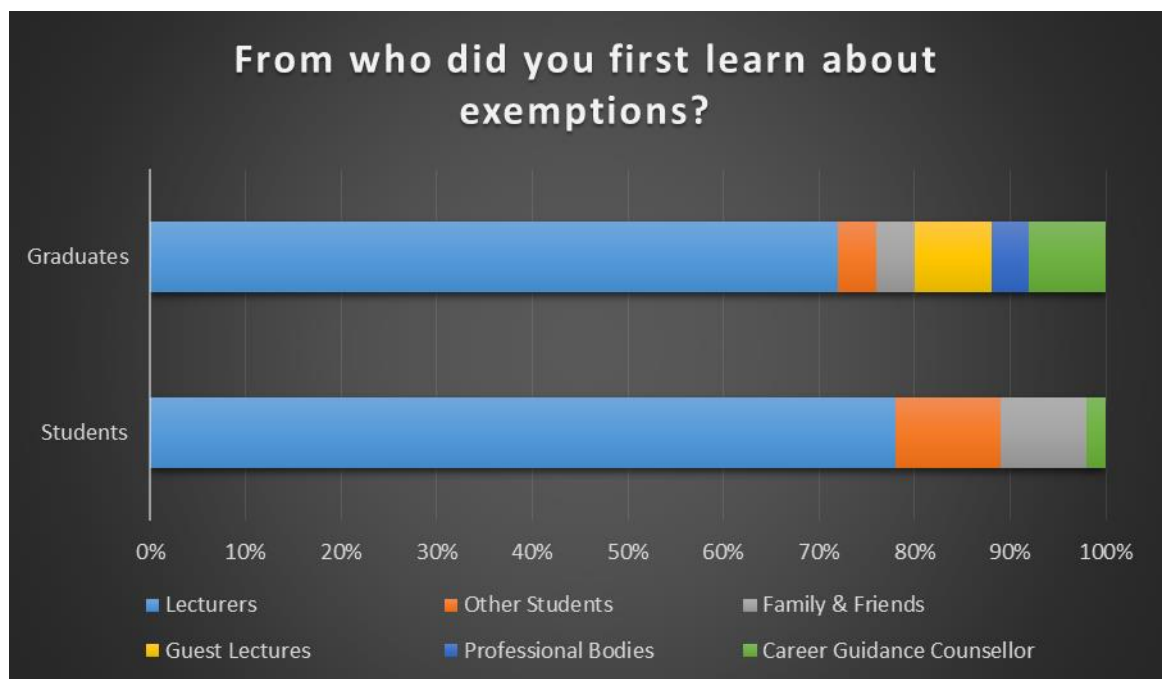
“I had a cousin who did the same course and he advised me to get 50% in all my exams, but it was only in fourth year it actually clicked why he stressed it so much” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“I wasn’t aware of exemptions before college it was just luck in choosing the course that it fell right for me, we didn’t have a career guidance counsellor” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

“I would say that career guidance [counsellor] probably told me but sure I didn’t have a clue what that meant. I suppose they only really started talking about them in third year” (Student Interviewee 1).

See Figure 5.3 below of a breakdown of who the respondents first heard about exemptions from.

**Figure 5.3. From who respondents first heard about exemptions**



Given the importance placed on exemptions by accounting students and graduates it was surprising to hear how few students knew or heard about exemptions before entering college. It was interesting to discover that approximately three quarters of students and graduates relied on lecturers to inform them about their entitlements to exemptions from professional examinations. It appears from this that accounting

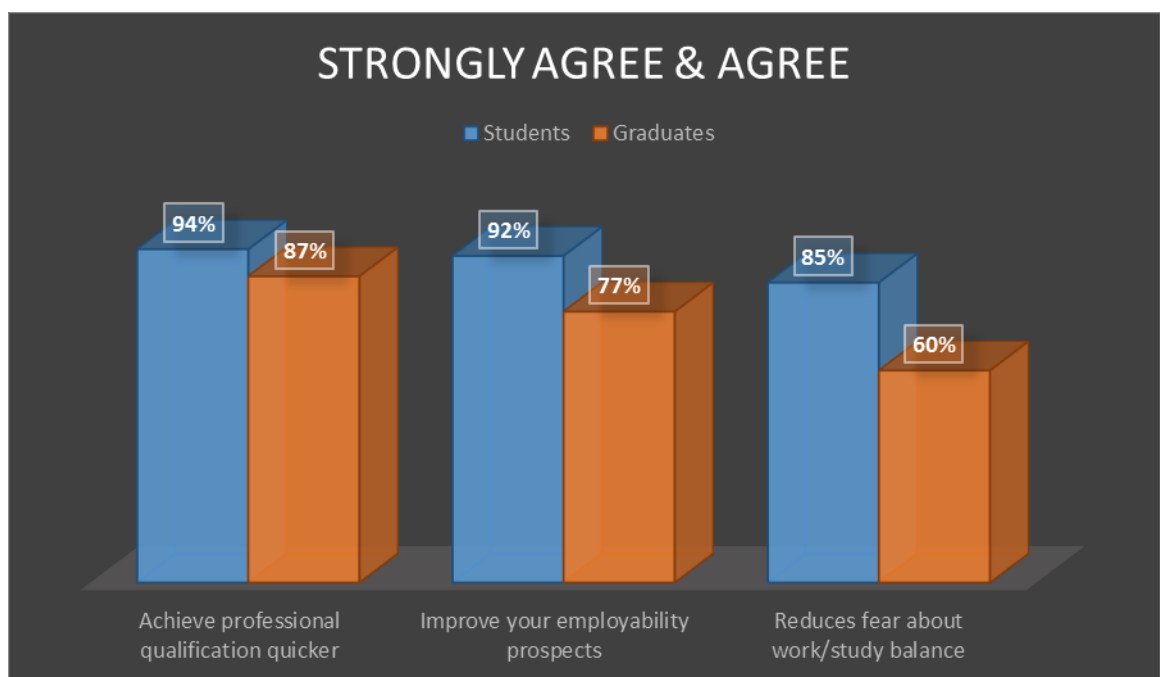


students' awareness and understanding of the role of exemptions depends mainly on the actions taken by third level institutions to inform accounting students.

### 5.3 Value of Exemptions

It was at this stage of the study the researcher wanted to establish *why* exemptions were so valued. Almost all students (49/53) and graduates (29/30) agreed that having exemptions is important to them. So this study wanted to find out what the key reasons for this were. Figure 5.4 provides the opinions of the respondents surveyed:

**Figure 5.4 Importance of Exemptions to Respondents**



### *5.3.1 Expedite Qualification*

The majority of the survey respondents (94% of students and 87% of graduates) stated that exemptions will help/ helped them to achieve their professional qualification more quickly. Graduates spoke about it being important to them to gain as many exemptions as possible in order to have less exams to do while training and to expedite becoming qualified as an accountant. The faster they were qualified the quicker they would move up through the ranks at work.

“My aim was to get into the workplace as quickly as possible and get my qualification as quick as I could” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

“I was delighted after spending four years in college, I had very little to do afterwards. I had passed all exams after a year” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

“The end game is to become a qualified accountant in the least amount of time, while at college you just want to keep passing exams so the least amount of professional exams to do the better” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

Students also appreciated how having more exemptions meant reducing the number of professional accounting exams needed to complete when graduating.

“I want to get qualified as soon as I can, I don’t want to be doing exams after I leave college” (Student Interviewee 3).

“Just to get the exams out of the way as quick as possible, the exemptions would help get there faster” (Student Interviewee 6).

“For anybody who is planning on going straight into professional exams, to have as many exemptions as you can, to bring down the amount of exams you have to do afterwards is very good.” (Student Interviewee 7).

“When I go out to chartered exams, being exempt from all CAP1’s is fantastic, you can go straight into CAP2’s. When I start it will be very useful.” (Student Interviewee 4).

### *5.3.2 Improve Employability*

When asked whether having exemptions affects their employability, 92% of students and 77% of graduates felt that achieving exemptions helps improve their employment prospects when they graduate. Having exemptions were seen as demonstrating to employers the commitment graduates have to their careers. Graduates with more exemptions were thought to have better career opportunities.

“I think employers put a huge emphasis on exemptions, we are being asked about them all the time in interviews” (Student Interviewee 1).

“Employers will ask you what you are exempt from. We have to put in our CVs all the professional exams and bodies we are exempt from, to make it easier for them to decide who they want” (Student Interviewee 9).

“Employers will take on the person with the most exemptions because you are not missing as much time for study leave” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

Both students and graduates beliefs as to the value employers place on exemptions is further explored later in this study.

### 5.3.3 *Reduce Pressure when working*

In the course of conversations with some interviewees, concerns were raised about the difficulty in achieving a balance between work and studying for professional exams after graduating. As part of the survey, respondents were asked about whether having exemptions affected this balance when out working. 85% of students and 60% of graduates believe that exemptions are an important influence over an accounting graduates work-life balance. Students felt it was an important influence because professional exams are viewed as very challenging when working full-time. While less graduates share this view, perhaps this indicates that graduates do not think studying for professional exams are as difficult as they thought it would be.

“I only have about five more exams to do to be qualified. It is going to be tough when you are working late, to take the time to study and have a family and do all these other things” (Student Interviewee 5).

“I don’t want to be doing exams after I leave college and taking time out of work, it would be way too stressful” (Student Interviewee 3).

“I suppose being in college and not working full time is so much easier than working and having part-time college. We probably do better in our exams as a result” (Student Interviewee 2).

“I know it is going to be tough working full-time, going to a lecture from 6 to 9 p.m. and then having your weekends taken up with lectures, so it is a big commitment” (Student Interviewee 2).

Overall graduates agreed with students about the difficulty of studying and working while training. Exemptions were viewed as providing a confidence boost and motivated graduates during the next stage of the qualification process. In this way maximising the number of exemptions that can be earned while at college is considered an important way of managing these issues:

“It’s very hard to finish up here at four o’clock, open up the books and do another two or three hours. So while you are at college get as many done as you can, fantastic you will be thanking yourself in a few years (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“You are fresh and motivated during lectures at college. When attending lectures after working all day, it is physically draining which I feel affects your concentration” (Online Graduate Respondent).

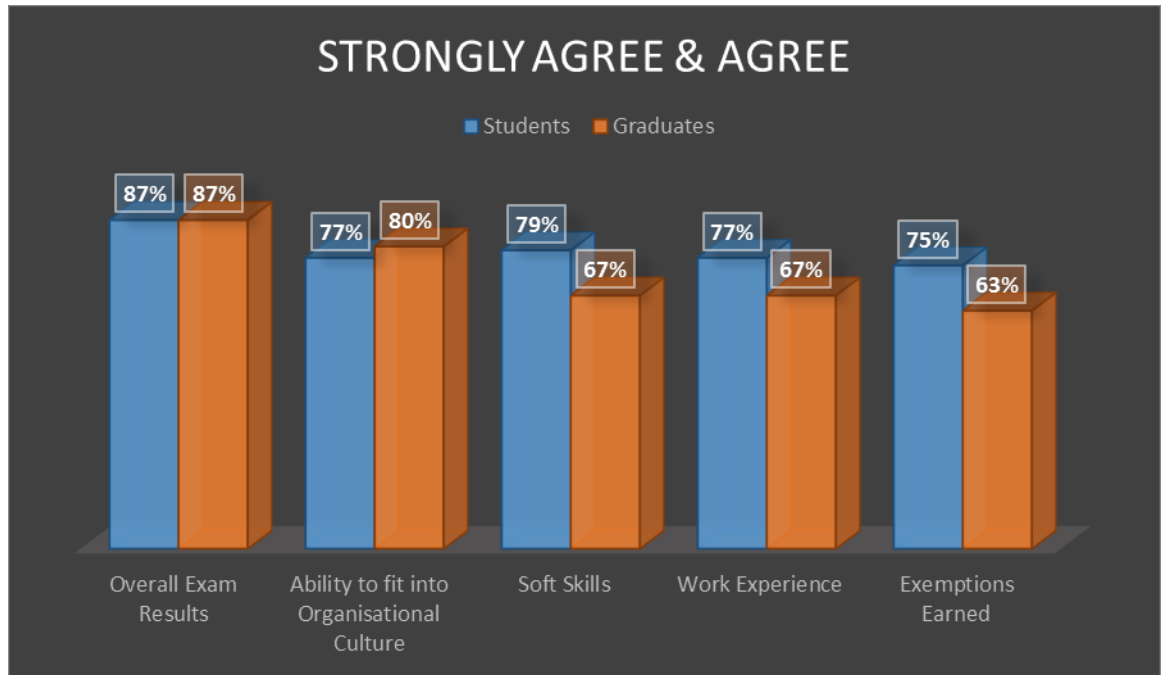
“After a long day at work you are thinking, do I have the energy to study? Whereas at college when you are here full-time, you can say I will stay on and study for an hour” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

Having established how valued exemptions were to accounting students and graduates personally, the researcher thought it would be interesting to hear how students and graduates believe employers view exemptions.

#### **5.4 Influence of Exemptions on Employability**

When it comes to employing for graduate positions, 87% of both students and graduates surveyed think that a candidates overall exam results is the main concern of potential employers. During interviews with the participants, work ethic and leadership skills were thought to be almost as important to employers as exemptions are. In the survey the second highest rated factor was the ability to get on with the team. Even though highly valued by students, it is interesting that students and graduates see getting on with the team, development of soft skills and work experience as being more important to employers than the number of exemptions earned. Figure 5.5 below presents this information graphically.

*Figure 5.5. How Students and Graduates believe Employers select Graduates*



These results were echoed in the interviews with students and graduates. Again fit with the organisation was considered more important than exemptions by both students and graduates.

“Employers look at the person they are interviewing and whether they will fit in rather than looking at how many exemptions they have” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“I think certain companies are more exam orientated but most are hiring a person and not a student” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“I know employers who hire people who haven’t even done accounting courses or come from different backgrounds so exemptions are not hugely important to them” (Student Interviewee 6).

“I think exemptions are a bonus but in terms of getting the right candidate it is more about their personality and whether culturally they will fit into the team” (Student Interviewee 2).

During interviews with graduates they described how a candidates’ leadership skills, work ethic and prior work experience contributes more to how employers select graduates than their academic achievements.

“In some interviews, the interviewers want to see how you can handle a situation when dealing with different people” (Graduate Interviewee 4).

“It is about the individual really, what they can bring, their personality and work ethic” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

“I think it does come down to your work ethic, employers recognise and value your interest in your job, would your grades [exemptions] reflect this” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“I found it was my experience as a deputy manager in dealing with staff and customers that, I think is what got me the job rather than exemptions. We didn’t speak about exemptions in the interview” (Graduate Interviewee 4).

While not seen as important as other attributes, 75% of students and 63% of graduates surveyed still believe that the number of exemptions earned is important to employers when hiring graduates. The interviewees feel that employers see exemptions as a time and cost saving to them. If graduates have more exemptions they will need less study leave which causes less workplace disruption. Exemptions are thought to represent more of a saving to employers rather than the knowledge graduates would have gained from having done these exams:

“I think employers are more likely to choose someone who has the exemptions than someone who hasn’t, especially where they provide paid study leave and there is a chance that they would fail and need to repeat which is not good for them” (Student Interviewee 3).

“They [employers] will ask you what are you exempt from, we have to put our exemption in our CV’s. I suppose it is handy for them” (Student Interviewee 6).

Graduates and students did think that the exemptions are only important to the employer if the employer is paying for the student to study and sit for the professional exams.

“If the employer pays for you to go to college then the more exemptions you have, the less professional exams you have to do and the less exams they will need to pay for” (Student Interviewee 7).

“If the employer is paying for the professional exams they take a lot more notice of them but if they are not, then they are not really pushed by them” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“From an employers’ perspective it is very beneficial if we have exemptions it saves them money, we look more attractive.” (Student Interviewee 1).

“It depends if the employer will pay for the graduate to go on to do the professional exams or not, then it is important” (Student Interviewee 7).



Some graduates did feel that having exemptions proves to potential employers that you were motivated to do well. It illustrates the efforts you have made to get your qualification to date:

“Employers are looking for a trainee with the least amount of exams to do, it shows that they have gone to the effort to study. The firm will get a qualified accountant quicker and at less expense” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

However this graduate was quick to add that it is still ultimately about saving time and cost to employers.

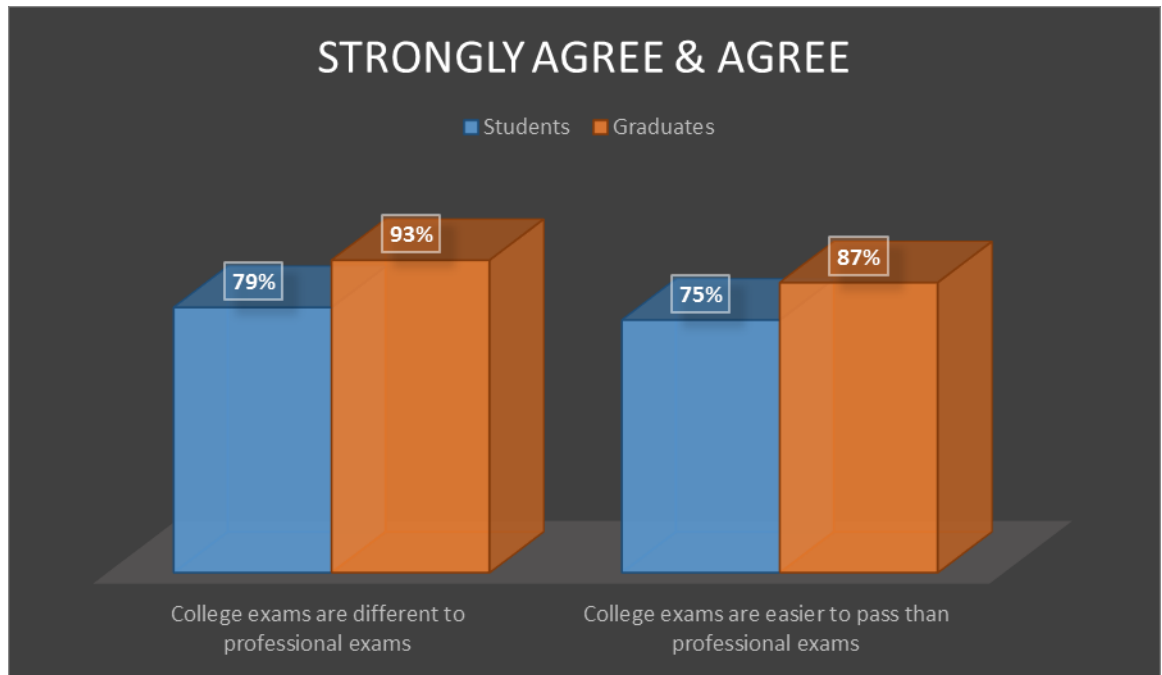
Having reflected on this question, the respondents did think that graduates overall exam results is the biggest influence on employers. This was followed by organisational fit and soft skills. The number of exemptions graduates earned were still thought to be an important influence on employers when selecting graduates for their workplace. The slight difference in these results could be explained by graduates who are now in the workplace and rate *fit with the organisation* as a more important factor than students do. While student’s who have not yet started their training contracts, rate *exemptions* as more important to employers than graduates do.

## 5.5 Professional Examinations

When the respondents were asked to compare professional exams to college exams, the researcher was trying to establish how ready graduates feel for professional exams. Does having exemptions affect graduates exam readiness? From this study we already understand that accounting students are incentivised to earn exemptions while studying for their accounting degree. Both students and graduates value exemptions from future professional exams, but the researcher wanted to know what

they understood about the transition from third-level to professional level examinations. The results of the survey shown below in figure 5.6, show that a majority of the graduates and students see professional exams as very different and much more difficult to pass than college exams.

*Figure 5.6. Professional Exams Vs College Exams*



During discussions about this question, students spoke about how having access to lecturers to assist them with their studies makes third-level education easier compared to the professional exam process. As a result exemptions are thought to be more easily attainable while studying full-time at college. The respondents felt that this makes college exams easier to pass than the equivalent professional paper.

“In college the lecturer sets the exam and you know the lecturer, whereas for professional exams you don’t know who sets the exam. It is more like the leaving cert, you are preparing for a blind exam, and the lecturer has to cover everything because they don’t know [what will be examined].” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“At college the lecturer might give some hints before an exam so you probably know more going in compared to going into professional exams completely blind where it examines everything.” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

Respondents mentioned how college exams are considered different because the modular syllabus at college is more concise and easier to manage. Students cover a smaller syllabus over fifteen week modules. During professional exams graduates have to study a much broader syllabus adequately, answer more complex style questions and have no direct contact with the professional examiner who sets the paper.

“For professional exams ....you have got your notes and you have a mass of information that you try to cut down to what is relevant” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“The professional exams are very broad, you don’t get any hints or know what is going to be on the paper” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“[For professional exams] you have a massive volume of material to cover” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

Even though professional exams were considered very different, overall graduates felt ready for professional exams. The interviewees stated that they were happy that the college process had taught them the discipline and skills required to study and approach professional exams. Students spoke favourably about the opportunity of doing sample professional exam questions while still in college. They found this helpful in giving them insight into the complexity of professional exam questions and the confidence needed to tackle professional style questions:

“I felt there was a leap but it was more to do with the sheer volume rather than how difficult the exams were.” (Graduate Interviewee 1).

“Yes I was quite diligent, I had good attendance and I worked hard. We were disciplined going into the professional exams, you carry that forward from college.” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“I think college teaches us how to think. It gives us a foundation. When you do a question in lectures you know where to begin and then over time it [college] teaches the techniques you need to tackle the questions” (Student Interviewee 3).

“I think we are ready. We get professional exam questions in class so it gives us an idea of what we are letting ourselves in for later on.” (Student Interviewee 10).

“Hopefully yes we will be ready, the lecturers do really prepare us by using past exam papers” (Student Interviewee 9).

The fact that some of the college lecturers are also professional exam educators reassured students that they were adequately prepared for professional level papers:

“College has prepared us because we do professional exam questions in class. Our lecturers teach professional exam students so we are taught how to approach the questions.” (Student Interviewee 6).

“I know our lecturer is very focussed on CAP2 level financial management questions, which gives us a brilliant insight into it” (Student Interviewee 2).

“Some of the lecturers here really do prepare us. The lecturers give us practice exams in CAP1s and CAP2s. They really want us to know what we need to know going into the exams” (Student Interviewee 9).

Graduates spoke about the difference between the methods of assessment used and how this affects the approach graduates take when preparing for professional level examinations. Open-book and computer based assessments have been introduced by some of the professional bodies. The interviewees spoke about discovering that a different exam technique was required in order to pass these examinations;

“Before doing an open book assessment I thought it would be fine, that I would have everything with me. But there is a technique to it and a certain standard of answer expected from it” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“They are computer based which sounded fantastic but if you are wrong on a computer based assessment there are no bonus marks.” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

The fact that graduates have to juggle work and study when preparing for professional exams requires new and different demands on their time, according to interviewees;

“In college you have a week to study you work hard and do well, whereas for professional exams it is a long campaign” (Graduate Interviewee 5).

“It is supposed to be more difficult than college exams, you are working full time and studying part-time. I think it is going to be a lot more of a workload” (Student Interviewee 7).

“I don’t think you can take the chance with professional exams, you need to change your whole study routine. The employers give you time off work to study because you have so much to do.” (Student Interviewee 6).

Similarly to the changes in how graduates timetable study, they also need to consider in what way the professional syllabus is examined. The interviewees described how the practice of rote learning lecture notes for college exams, cannot be used successfully for professional exams. Professional papers instead tend to award marks on the graduates deeper knowledge abilities, through real-life scenario type exam questions that assess the student's depth of understanding, creativity and professional skill, rather than rewarding a regurgitation of theory.

“Professional exams take a better approach. There is more emphasis on understanding the content [professional exams] rather than setting a memory exercise.” (Graduate Interviewee 3).

“College exams are about learning it off and putting it down on paper, whereas professional exams are about applying information to scenarios” (Graduate Interviewee 2).

“The exam itself is more about applying what you know to a long case study type questions, so it needs a lot of reading before you can actually answer the question” (Student Interviewee 4).

“From what I have heard I think professional exams are broader. You have to think outside the box, it is more about what you know and how you can use it rather than just learning things off like for college exams” (Student Interviewee 3).

When considering together both the survey and the opinions of the interviewees, these findings indicated to the researcher that the purpose of awarding exemptions at third level is to reduce the difficulty associated with professional exams. By reducing the number of professional examinations graduates are required to take, allows graduates to cope better with the new challenges and demands of professional education and training.

## 5.6 Conclusion

The overall finding from this chapter was that exemptions are indeed highly valued by both students and graduates. They are seen to play an important role in motivating students to perform well at college and are viewed as very useful because they help to expedite qualification and reduce the effort required by graduates to achieve their professional qualification. When questioned further it was interesting to discover more about when and how students first learnt about exemptions.

These questions led to the finding that the majority of those surveyed did not know about exemptions before beginning their third-level accounting programme. This suggests that there is little or no point in third level colleges marketing their courses to second-level students based on the number of exemptions that could be earned. Even the students who had heard about exemptions before starting college did not realise the value of exemptions to them later on in third-level. This shows how little influence exemptions have on students when choosing their third level courses.

Efforts should continue to be made by colleges to improve awareness of exemptions by students. Students rely heavily on their lecturers for guidance and information about their careers. Lecturers along with professional accounting bodies may need to find innovative ways of improving student's awareness about exemptions earlier on in their education. While raising the issue of exemptions in first year could be considered too early by some accounting students, most students admitted in the study, that they would appreciate knowing the need for clear passes of over 50% in their modules from the first year of college to allow them to start earning exemptions from professional exams.

Because of the importance students and graduates place on exemptions, different approaches could be taken by colleges to ensure accounting students are reminded of

exemptions on an annual basis. By making information available and visible to students of all years such as details of exemptions on Department notice boards and attending career fairs where professional accounting bodies are represented. The majority of those surveyed stated that it was their lecturers they relied upon to inform them about their exemption entitlements, so perhaps lecturers should continue to adopt the role of guiding students helping them to access information from relevant accountancy bodies.

Over the course of the study, the concern about dealing with work and study was a source of real anxiety to students compared to graduates. Almost all admit that they believe professional exams to be different and more difficult to pass than college exams. In this regard students could benefit from meeting recent graduates to provide reassurance that the process of professional training and education while difficult is not impossible. Emphasis could be made on the importance of earning exemptions, to help reduce the stress associated with handling both work and study, by reducing the number of professional exams needed to complete after graduating.

Even though throughout the study, students and graduates are keen to stress the importance of exemptions to themselves, when questioned whether they felt exemptions were important to employers, the majority felt that how a graduate fits in a team and their leadership skills are thought to be as important to employers as the number of exemptions graduates have earned.

Overall the findings highlight what it is accounting students and graduates regard as important to them in becoming an accountant. Therefore this study should be of assistance to educators when reassessing the content of accountancy programmes and perhaps to professional accounting bodies when accrediting accounting degrees given the views expressed by those in the process of becoming an accountant.



## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of this study by outlining the findings in relation to each of the research questions derived from the objective of the study. This provides the evidence required to show that exemptions earned during an accounting degree are indeed, highly valued by accounting students and graduates. In order to answer the research questions the researcher conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews, ten with current accounting students and five with recent accounting graduates. The findings from these interviews were substantiated by the information collected from eighty-three online surveys. Fifty-three were from students and thirty from graduates. All participants and respondents were students and graduates of the same third-level institution, namely Cork Institute of Technology. This chapter then concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this research and suggests possible related areas of future research.

### 6.2 Addressing the Research Questions

While anecdotally exemptions are highly valued by students and graduates, as far as the researcher is aware, there is no evidence that this is actually the case. The objective of this study is to verify if exemptions are valued by third-level accounting students and graduates. This has been articulated as follows in the title of the dissertation:

*Value of Exemptions from Professional Examinations:  
Opinion of Third-Level Accounting Students and Graduates*

To achieve this objective the researcher derived four research questions posed in Chapter 3:

- Question 1:** What do accounting students value about the accounting qualification process?
- Question 2:** When and how do accounting students first learn about exemptions?
- Question 3:** Should exemptions be given priority during accounting education?
- Question 4:** Why are exemptions important to accounting students and graduates in becoming an accountant?

These research questions emerged during the initial interviews and formed the basis of the questions in subsequent interviews with students and graduates, in finding out their views on accounting education. These questions were then also used in the online survey sent to students and recent graduates of CIT. From analysis of the findings of these questions, the result is that exemptions are highly valued by students and graduates, who show a preference for exemption-led modules over non-exemption led ones.

### *6.2.1 Value of Accounting Qualification Process*

Extant literature describes how an accounting qualification typically entails a dual process, where a third-level degree is followed by a training contract combined with professional examination. Commonly referred to as learning through knowing, education provides students with a valuable knowledge base. It develops in students

the confidence needed to tackle the work issues that will come before them. Education is followed by a period of professional training. Learning through doing allows graduates to build on this bank of knowledge, to understand and apply the theory learnt at third-level to real-life practice (Wilson, 2011; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). In this way the role of third-level is to prepare students to *become* accountants while the role of training is to prepare graduates to *be* accountants (Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

To extend the literature further, the researcher wanted to find out what students and graduates value most about the accounting qualification process. During interviews with the participants about becoming an accountant, they began to speak about the importance of getting good results during college, to not only help secure employment contracts, but also to get exemptions. It became evident to the researcher that exemptions were considered a very important part of the qualification process.

Exemptions were seen as helping to motivate students to work hard at college and as an opportunity to reduce the number of professional examinations graduates need to sit while training. Exemptions expedite the qualification process, because of this students were even prepared to repeat a college exam to earn the exemption. Some graduates regretted not maximising the number of exemptions they could have achieved during their degree. College exams are viewed as easier to pass and help graduates during the transition from third-level education to training and professional examinations. Both students and graduates value exemptions as a very important part of becoming an accountant, because of this the researcher wanted to understand more about what they knew about exemptions.

### *6.2.2 First Knowledge of Exemptions*

There was a dearth of literature on the awareness or understanding by accounting students about exemptions. Much of the literature focused instead on the role of accreditation of accounting programmes at third-level. By being able to provide students with the chance to achieve exemptions from professional accounting exams, accreditation of accounting degrees is much sought after by third-level institutions. Accredited degrees are believed to offer accounting graduates better education and career opportunities (Harvey, 2004; Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014).

In the survey only fourteen percent of respondents had known about exemptions before beginning their accounting degree. This revealed that students are not attending college to earn exemptions but to study accounting. Or perhaps it shows that they still do not fully understand what the process of becoming an accountant involves. Even though the participants during interviews spoke strongly in favour of earning exemptions at college, it was interesting to discover in the survey that exemptions were not a factor in choosing a third-level accounting degree. By the end of second year, over seventy-five percent of respondents had heard about exemptions. While not important initially to students, exemptions become more important as students begin to understand more about becoming an accountant and the demands of training and professional examinations.

In trying to fully comprehend what accounting students and graduates know about exemptions, the researcher enquired as to how they first heard about exemptions. The researcher learnt that almost eighty percent of respondents had heard about exemptions from their lecturers. While only twelve percent relied on information from career guidance counsellors and professional accounting bodies. These results demonstrate how accounting students rely heavily on information introduced to them about their profession from their lecturers. It also shows how a lack of access to information about exemptions before choosing a third-level degree could cost

students the opportunity to earn exemptions in the future. Interviewees spoke about the difficulty in differentiating between professional accounting bodies and understanding how exemptions operate, until well advanced in their accounting qualification. This led the researcher to question that if exemptions are not needed to attract potential accounting students, why do lecturers and third-level institutions continue to value them.

### *6.2.3 Prioritising Exemptions*

One of the main topics of discussion in accounting education literature was the expectation that graduates should have sufficient technical knowledge and skills to be work-ready (Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Pan & Perera, 2012; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). Yet much of the literature reports that graduates often lack the generic skills expected of them in the workplace. Accredited accounting degrees continue to focus on technical knowledge development over generic skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). This approach by third-level institutions to accounting education is still pursued, despite many in the profession who believe that generic skills are more important and more closely aligned with career success (Jackling & De Lange, 2008; Flood, 2014). Could it be that third-level institutes are fighting too hard to maintain exemptions, to the detriment of developing students' generic skills?

In exchange for accredited status, professional accounting bodies require that third-level institutions comply with their stated educational standards and recommendations (Harvey, 2004; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Bayerlein & Timpson, 2017). In this way professional accounting bodies influence the content and assessment of accredited modules offered at third-level. In contrast to the arguments for reform, other commentators believe that graduates cannot be expected to have all the generic skills without first having an adequate knowledge base (Cranmer, 2006; Cunningham, 2014; St. Pierre & Rebele, 2014; Watty, 2014). The

challenge for third-level education is finding the right balance between developing students' professional knowledge, skills and competences, and providing modules that allow students earn exemptions, and indeed maximise exemptions.

Overall the majority of both students and graduates are satisfied with studying exemption-led degrees over non-exemption bearing ones. While participants in the study did acknowledge the benefit of a broader education, neither students nor graduates were in favour of *replacing* exemption-led modules. Graduates accepted that even though they did lack some workplace skills as they began their professional career, they still preferred having less professional exams to study for. Many interviewees felt that any deficiency in generic skills can be learnt online or in-house. Even though the literature calls for reform in the accounting qualification process, overall graduates of accounting degrees were satisfied with the focus of accounting degree content.

#### *6.2.4 Value of Exemptions*

According to the literature accredited degrees are believed to be important to educators and third-level institutions in attracting students to accounting programmes. However the issue with accreditation is that third-level institutions desire to earn it, may prevent educators making innovative changes to accounting programmes called for by the profession (Harvey, 2004; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014). The belief by third-level institutions that accounting graduates demand exemptions, means that accounting programmes are designed with a technical focus (Pan & Perera, 2012; Apostolou & Gammie, 2014; Paisey & Paisey, 2014), perhaps to the detriment of developing other skills. Because of the dearth of literature about the role of exemptions in accounting education, this became an area of interest to the researcher to find out if students and graduates really value exemptions and why.

While this study found that accounting students did not know about exemptions before beginning their third-level degree, exemptions did become important as students progressed towards qualification. The key reasons exemptions were found to be important, were that it helped to expedite the qualification process, improved employability skills and reduced the fear about work-life balance. Overall exemptions are highly valued by students and graduates. They spoke about the importance of having as many exemptions as possible to have less exams to do when training. Respondents felt that exemptions reflect the effort that students have put into their career. They believe employers view graduates with fewer exams to do more favourably than other graduates without exemptions. However the respondents did feel that it was the graduates overall degree results that were more important to employers. Interviewees spoke about the importance of work ethic and leadership skills being as important to employers as exemptions are. Yet still they accepted that exemptions were of more value to them personally than to their employers.

Students were more concerned than graduates about earning exemptions as a way of managing work and professional exams when training. Perhaps being able to prioritise work and study wasn't as difficult as graduates thought it would be. Graduates found having studied exemption-led technical knowledge, their experience with professional accounting examinations was better than they had expected. These findings showed a shift in attitude by accounting students about their ability to manage work and study before and after graduating.

Once graduates begin sitting professional examinations they grow more confident about passing their professional papers and managing work. College exams are considered different because the syllabus is more concise and students at third-level have access to the lecturers who set their papers. Compared to professional examinations the syllabus is much broader and the questions are more complex and tasking than at third-level. In this sense, exemptions were viewed as more easily achieved by students studying full-time during an accounting degree than passing an equivalent professional paper.

### **6.3 Overall Finding**

This study has found that exemptions from professional examinations are a highly valued part of the accounting qualification process. The main benefit of exemptions for accounting students and graduates is that exemptions expedite qualification. Professional examinations are viewed as challenging while working full-time. Exemptions help by reducing the number of professional examinations graduates must pass and are considered easier to earn at third-level. What is interesting is that graduates were less anxious about managing professional work and study than students. Even though graduates felt they lacked some skills needed in the workplace, they were not prepared to lose exemption-bearing modules just to develop these skills.

### **6.4 Critique of Findings**

The objective of this study was to determine the value of exemptions from professional accounting examinations. The findings confirmed that indeed exemptions are important to accounting students and graduates, but while determining this other matters were uncovered. Most accounting students do not know about exemptions before beginning college, yet third level institutions market their accounting degrees based on the availability of exemptions. Accounting students do value exemptions, but do not understand their impact until later on in their qualification. Students admit to relying heavily on their lecturers for guidance about their professional career. Perhaps lecturers should then encourage students to engage with professional accounting bodies and learn more about exemptions earlier on in their degree. Third-level institutions could facilitate this by providing more opportunities for accounting students to hear from guest speakers and attend career fairs where professional accounting bodies are represented. Awareness of



exemptions motivates students and encourages them to perform better during third-level assessments.

Even though the majority of the participants of the study are satisfied with exemption-led degree content, graduates felt that their generic skills were deficient when they began their professional training contracts. A recommendation of this study would be for educators, PABs and employers to examine together ways of improving generic skills without reducing the number of exemptions students earn. Exemptions are important to students because they allow students earn professional milestones while still studying for their degree. Accounting students are keen to retain exemptions but do accept that some generic skill training is necessary to be work-ready, whether this is provided during third-level education, placement or training. Perhaps the introduction of earlier and regular work placement of accounting students, rather than waiting until third year could help to reinforce the generic skills that graduates lack and still allow students earn exemptions.

While exemptions expedite qualification and improve graduates employability prospects, exemptions are also sought by third-level accounting students because they reduce their fear about work-life balance when they graduate. Accounting graduates who have begun or completed their professional examinations are less concerned about having to balance work and study. Third-level institutions could introduce a mentorship programme designed to reassure current accounting students about professional examinations and help to build students confidence before they graduate.

## 6.5 Limitations of this study

This study provides much needed evidence that exemptions are highly regarded by both third-level students and graduates of accounting programmes. This exploratory, descriptive research, while narrowing the existing gap in the literature, has limitations that are discussed here.

In fulfilment of the requirements for a Master in Business, this dissertation was the first major piece of academic research undertaken by the researcher. Along with experience, time was another limiting factor for the researcher, this research had to be completed within twenty months. However this proved to be adequate time for the study.

Participants of the online surveys were current accounting students and recent accounting graduates of CIT. The students represented were in third and fourth year of their degree programmes, some of whom did not have work placement experience prior to the survey. The researcher felt that the benefit of work experience provides a different understanding about exemptions and their role in the accounting qualification process. The graduates in this study represented a diverse spread across professional accounting bodies, industry and practice. Some were fully qualified, others were still undertaking professional examinations. The diversity of the participants in the survey did not allow the researcher to determine the views of any specific professional sector or PAB. However it did show an alignment of opinions about how exemptions are valued among the participants.

The programme in CIT is very much exemption-led, and students and graduates of CIT may have been influenced by that. This is acknowledged throughout the study, but is also a limitation of the study as if this study was done somewhere else there may have been very different results. This is an area the researcher wishes to pursue further after this study has been completed.

## 6.6 Areas of Future Research

The main future area of interest for the research is to explore this research objective using students and graduates of other third-level institutes. In particular it would be interesting to compare the results with cohorts from a National University of Ireland (NUI).

As this research determined how accounting students and graduates value exemptions, it would have been interesting to find out how employers view exemptions. Accounting graduates believe exemptions improve their employability prospects, but the researcher would like to know what employers value about exemptions. If graduates had more professional examinations to do would this really matter to employers? Perhaps how graduates contribute to the workplace would be considered more important. Employers may not value exemptions as much as graduates do. It would be interesting to see if employer's opinions differ across professional accounting practice, industry and the public sector. This study has examined what students and graduates thought employers value in accounting graduates. The researcher feels by understanding what employers require most from accounting graduates, that this knowledge would provide a complete understanding of the importance of exemptions in the accounting qualification process.

Another area of research could be to investigate the opinions of third-level educators and why they feel exemptions are important to accounting students. Do they think earning exemptions should be given priority when designing modular content and assessments for accounting degrees? Why do third-level institutions and educators seek accreditation for accounting degrees? Answers to these questions could improve the understanding of and need for exemptions in the future. As a result educators

may re-evaluate what accounting graduates benefit most from during accounting education.

This study also revealed that accounting students did not know about exemptions until after they began their third-level education. Perhaps future research could investigate how PABs interact with potential accounting students. PABs could address the lack of communication with second-level students, by ensuring career guidance counsellors are more familiar with the accounting qualification process.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The existing literature about the accounting qualification describes it as a dual process. Education is followed by a period of professional training and examinations. There is a dearth of literature about the role of exemptions as part of the accounting qualification. It instead focuses on how education has adopted a technical focus to allow students earn exemptions. Extant literature described how graduates often lack the generic skills necessary to be work-ready. A gap exists in the literature about what accounting students and graduates value from an accounting degree, whether or not exemptions are valued by accounting graduates. This study addresses that gap and evaluates why and how exemptions are important to accounting students and graduates. It determined from an accounting students' perspective whether exemptions should be given priority over a broader non-exemption led education. It outlined the research objective and how this objective was achieved by answering four research questions. An analysis of these questions was then discussed and evaluated.

Accounting students and graduates recognise the importance of exemptions to expedite qualification, improve career opportunities and helping to manage work and study for professional examinations. The study discovered that accounting students

know little about what an accounting qualification entails until later on in their degree. Third-level institutions should focus on promoting awareness of exemptions and professional examinations earlier on in college. Exemptions are valued by graduates because they reduce the number of professional papers needed to pass to qualify, but they also encourage students to perform better during their degree. The achievement of exemptions is a standard of knowledge recognised across the profession. These benefits have been outlined in this study, as well as a discussion on the limitations of the research and potential areas for future research.

## Appendices

### APPENDIX I: Plea for Student Interviewees

#### Research Masters in “Role of Third Level in the Education of Accountants”

Lorraine Rahilly

As part of my Masters I am carrying out a research study that will focus on accounting graduate’s readiness for professional accounting exams.

I am looking for as many students as possible to volunteer for a 15 minute interview to be arranged as soon as possible.

Benefits to you:

- Useful for the reflective element of your learning log
- Good for personal development / interview skills
- Include on your CV that you took part in research study interviews
- No prep needed, no wrong answers (Not graded/evaluated)
- Anonymity ensured throughout.
- Interviews planned to suit you

I’d appreciate if you could help me, so if you are interested please fill in the slip of paper below and hand it back to me today, or email me later on [lorraine.rahilly@mycit.ie](mailto:lorraine.rahilly@mycit.ie) stating that you’d like to take part and I’ll get back to you as quickly as possible as I’m keen to start next week.

Thanks for listening and please take part  
*Lorraine*

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#### Interested in taking part in research project

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Course: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mobile Number: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX II: Email to Graduate Interviewees**

Dear Graduate,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you, Sylvia Dempsey passed your email address on to me.

I am currently doing a research masters on Accounting Education with Sylvia at the moment and we are looking for graduates who have gone through professional exams to interview about their opinions on the role of Third-Level Institutions and the education of accountants. I am just hoping to find out what it is you think about the importance of exemptions, the course you did and the transition to professional exams. Any information provided will remain confidential.

I am hoping to get through the interviews as quickly as possible so if you are interested the interview itself takes twenty minutes and we can make an arrangement to meet at a time and place that is convenient for you.

Kind Regards,

Lorraine Rahilly

## **APPENDIX III: Student Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions**

Hi ... thanks for coming today. I really appreciate your help with my research. I hope you don't mind me recording this. None of your answers are right or wrong, I really just want to understand what it is you honestly think.

#### **Yourself**

1. Tell me a bit about yourself
2. What brought you to accounting in CIT?

#### **Role of Third Level**

3. How's your course going?
4. What motivates you in college? (pass exams/awards/exemptions/future profession)
5. What would you change about the course?
6. What do you think about the content of the course you are studying?
7. Your course is very focused towards exemptions, do you think this is a good idea?
8. How would you feel if the modules that earn exemptions were replaced by modules that would give you a broader education (like IT)?
9. What are your thoughts about modularisation and semesterisation (V's year end exams) as a prep for professional exams?

#### **Exemptions**

10. Before you came to CIT what did you know about exemptions?
11. How did you hear about exemptions?
12. How do you feel about how colleges market accounting courses based on exemptions?
13. How important are exemptions to you? Why?
14. Do you know the exemptions you are going to get?
15. Are they necessary do you think?
16. How do employers feel about exemptions, do you think?
17. So you have earned a lot of exemptions already, do you think you are ready for the next set of professional exams?
18. What do you know about professional accounting exams?
19. How does college help prepare you for professional exams?
20. In what way will professional accounting exams differ from college exams?
21. What advice would you give to someone considering studying Accounting?

**Is there anything else you would like to add?**

**Thanks for taking part. I will transcribe this interview and email it to you. Feel free to add, delete or amend parts. But it is all totally confidential and anonymised.**



## **APPENDIX IV: Graduate Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions**

Hi ... thanks for coming today. I really appreciate your help with my research. I hope you don't mind me recording this. None of your answers are right or wrong, I really just want to understand what it is you honestly think.

#### **Yourself**

22. Tell me a bit about yourself
23. Tell me about your Accounting exams. (stage you are at, what ones you are doing)
24. What attracted you to accounting?

#### **Third - Level**

1. What course did you do in college? Why? (Were exemptions mentioned in answer)
2. What do you think about the content of the degree you studied?
3. What do you think about modularisation and semesterisation at college? How about preparing you for professional exams?
4. How would you feel if the modules that earned exemptions were replaced by modules that would have given you a broader education (like IT/management/marketing), would that have been better/more useful?
5. Was your course was focused towards exemptions, do you think that was a good idea?
6. How do you feel about the way colleges market accounting courses based on exemptions?
7. When did you become aware of exemptions and how important were they to you?
8. Was it important to you to make sure that you achieve all the exemptions you could in college? Would you do the same if you were back now

#### **Professional exams**

1. How are (did) your professional exams going (go)?
2. What do you feel about exemptions now that you are doing professional exams?
3. Did you think, based on your college education, that you were ready for the professional exams?
4. How do they differ from college exams? Do you think college exams should be more like that?
5. Does doing the job of an accountant in any way help doing and passing professional exams?
6. Would there have been any benefit in having less exemptions and having to have worked your way through more of the professional exams?
7. Or would it have been more beneficial to have more exemptions?

**Employer's views of exemptions**

8. How do employers feel about exemptions, do you think?
9. What do you think employers value most in accounting graduates?
10. If you were hiring a graduate would exemptions be important?

**General Questions to finish off**

11. To get where you are now what would you have changed about the process if you could?
12. What advice would you give to someone in Leaving Cert who wants to do Accounting?
13. What advice would you give to someone in college wanting to do Accounting?

**Is there anything else you would like to add?**

**Thanks for taking part. I will transcribe this interview and email it to you. Feel free to add, delete or amend parts. But it is all totally confidential and anonymised.**

**Thanks again.**

## APPENDIX V: Student Survey Questions

\* 1. How do you believe employers select graduates, given that all graduates fill the same working hours and conditions. Is it based on:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Exemptions earned	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall exam results	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to fit into organisational culture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Soft skills e.g. Leadership, Teamwork	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other Information

2. How important is it to you to have the maximum exemptions on graduation?

- Very Important
- Important
- Neither important nor unimportant
- Not important at all

Why?

3. When did you first hear about exemptions?

- Before I started college
- First year at college
- Second Year at college
- Third Year at college
- Fourth Year at college

#### 4. From who did you first learn about exemptions?

- Lecturers
- Other Students
- Family & Friends
- Guest Lectures/ Careers Day
- Directly from Professional Bodies
- Career Guidance Counsellor
- Other relevant information

#### 5. Do you think college exams are easier to pass than professional exams?

- Yes
- No
- Why?

#### 6. Rate how important exemptions are to you based on the following statements

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Improves your employability prospects now	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Achieve professional qualification quicker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduces fear about work/study balance when working full time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. When you start professional exams are you concerned that

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
You will have forgotten a lot of the knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What you learnt in seperate modules was not integrated enough	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College exams are different to professional exams	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There are other things you would have preferred to have studied in college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Have you picked an accountancy body based on:

- the job you have got (or will get)
- the number of exams left to do
- reputation of the body
- Other (please specify)

9. Please provide your email address (note - all information provided is strictly confidential)

## APPENDIX VI: Graduate Survey Questions

1. How do you believe employers select graduates, given that all graduates fill the same working hours and conditions. Is it based on:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Exemptions earned	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall exam results	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to fit into organisational culture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Soft skills e.g. Leadership, Teamwork	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work experience	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other Information

2. How important was it to you to have the maximum number of exemptions on graduating?

- Very Important
- Important
- Neither important nor unimportant
- Not important at all

Why?

### 3. When did you first hear about exemptions?

- Before I started college
- First year at college
- Second Year at college
- Third Year at college
- Fourth Year at college
- After graduation

### 4. From who did you first learn about exemptions?

- Lecturers
- Other Students
- Family & Friends
- Guest Lectures/ Careers Day
- Directly from Professional Bodies
- Career Guidance Counsellor
- Other relevant information

### 5. Do you think college exams are easier to pass than professional exams?

- Yes
- No
- Why?

## 6. Rate how important exemptions were to you based on the following statements

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Improved your employability prospects	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helped achieve professional qualification quicker	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reduced fear about work/study balance when working full time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would not have pursued a professional qualification without a third level degree and exemptions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 7. When you started professional exams were you concerned that

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
You would have forgotten a lot of the knowledge you gained during your degree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What you learnt in separate modules of your degree was not integrated enough	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College exams were different to professional exams	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There were other things you would have preferred to have studied in college rather than exemptions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You missed the support of fellow students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)					



8. Did you pick an accountancy body based on:

- the job you got
- the number of exams left to do
- reputation of the body
- Other (please specify)

9. Please provide your email address (note - all information provided is strictly confidential)

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