



**“Creating capital”: The impact of sustained engagement with extracurricular activities on access students’ experience of University.**

Úna Redmond

B.Soc. Sc. MBS. M.Sc.

Doctor of Education

Dublin City University

Supervisors: Professor Joe O’Hara  
Dr Martin Stynes

DCU Institute of Education

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### **Declaration/Disclaimer**

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

Name: Úna Redmond

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

ID Number: 14212825

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2020

## **Dedication**

*Dedicated to the memory of my parents.*

*My father always urged us to “learn our lessons”, and my mother believed that “education was no load to carry”. They had a little education and a lot of wisdom.*

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I am extremely grateful to many people as, without their help; this thesis would not have been possible.

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Finally, thanks to my family, you can have the kitchen table back now!

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### **List of Acronyms**

SES	Socioeconomic Status
ECAs	Extracurricular Activities
DCU	Dublin City University
HEI	Higher Education Institution
OSL	Office of Student Life
LC	Leaving Certificate
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
WP	Widening participation

## **Abstract**

### **“Creating capital”: The impact of sustained engagement with extracurricular activities on access students’ experience of University.**

**Úna Redmond**

Holistic student development encompasses not only academic learning but also the development of skills such as problem solving and analysis while simultaneously recognising moral and emotional growth. Earlier research focused on the benefits of engagement with extracurricular activities and the broader non-formal curriculum in university settings. Studies concerned with the involvement of widening participation groups in extracurricular activities (ECAs) expressed concern that these groups do not enjoy equal access to extracurricular activities. Consequently, they may not be able to avail of vital social interaction, which can provide opportunities for accumulating social and cultural capital. To investigate this the researcher adopted a qualitative case study approach to gather data from nine graduates of the Dublin City University (DCU) Access programme. These graduates have come through a period of intensive, high-quality engagement with ECAs as validated and certified by the DCU Uaneen Module examination process.

Semi-structured interviews, as well as archival record and documentation, generated valuable insights into the experience of access students in a university setting and the creation of capital through their involvement with the learning milieu outside the classroom. The data were coded and queried using NVivo software and organised using thematic analysis. Interviews with the directors of two university access programmes provided further insights and observations. The findings are presented in a case study report with supporting evidence. The results suggest that the graduates did benefit, both personally and professionally, through their engagement and are in a position to recognise and appreciate this. Several recommendations are made which are intended to create an environment, which encourages and facilitates students who enter through the access programmes to fully and meaningfully engage with extracurricular activities thereby promoting the creation of capital and other beneficial personal and professional outcomes.



## **Chapter 1**

### **1.1. Introduction**

This exploratory study focused on the experiences of a small cohort of low socioeconomic status (SES) students and how they engaged with extracurricular activities (ECAs) while pursuing their undergraduate studies in Dublin City University (DCU). It charted their journey and explored how, despite reported barriers to participation in ECAs, they successfully navigated the process and graduated with a credit-bearing module in extracurricular activities. As such, it is success-focused (McKay and Devlin, 2014). It detailed the process by which they acquired essential social and cultural capital through their involvement in ECAs and highlighted the significance of this in their post-graduation lives.

### **1.2. Selecting a topic**

Before selecting a research topic, Thomson and Walker (2010) note the importance of sketching the nature of the field, identifying major debates and locating gaps in the research. This process creates a mandate for the study and recognises the contribution that it can make. Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to pursuing personal theories or hunches, but only when they have been developed through a systematic review of existing theory and research. All researchers, they claim, care deeply about their topic and demonstrate a commitment to sustaining the study. Creswell (2013) also advocates selecting a topic of particular interest to the researcher and one, which they are capable of pursuing. It is essential, to begin with, “an open” but “not an empty mind” (Janesick, 2000, p.384). Research questions often derive from practice issues. The absence of specific studies on this topic combined with the researcher’s interest in and long-standing involvement with ECAs provided the impetus to pursue this research topic. Merriam (1998, p.43) explains:

We observe something that puzzles us, we wonder about it, we want to know why it is the way it is, we ask whether something can be done to change it and so on (Merriam, 1998, p.43).

### **1.3. Then and now**

The researcher embarked on her University journey in 1981, at a time when only 20% of secondary school leavers in Ireland continued to third-level education (Barlow, 1981). Those who did it was claimed, were an exceptional minority, heavily drawn from the upper socioeconomic groups. Third-level enrolment was dominated by the universities, which accounted for over 60% of all enrolments, and a notable feature was that their socioeconomic makeup remained unchanged from the mid-sixties. There were no outreach programmes, access supports or a Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme to provide a roadmap and no academic or financial support to ease the path for those drawn from manual or semi-skilled backgrounds. Compounding the situation was the reality that the higher education grants scheme was of minimal benefit (Barlow, 1981), with only the most impoverished families eligible and the rates so low that even those who did qualify needed supplementary financial assistance to survive.

In the intervening decades, there has been a continual rise in the numbers entering higher education, fuelled by a national policy in Ireland strongly in favour of ‘massification’, that is, the move from a system that served an elite only to one that every member of society might aspire to experience. Despite a plethora of widening participation and access initiatives, massification remains uneven, and some socio-economic cohorts continue to be significantly underrepresented. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) reports that in 2017-18, over 60% of school leavers transferred to third-level education (Higher Education Authority, 2018a). Universities accounted for approximately 60% of that enrolment; however, their inequitable socioeconomic student body is still a cause for concern in the widening participation debate. To illustrate, almost a quarter of students from Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) are from fee-paying secondary schools. Comparable figures for Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in Athlone, Galway-Mayo and Tralee are below 1 per cent. Additionally, non-completion rates across universities and IoTs vary significantly both by discipline and by the prior educational attainment level of entrants. The latest non-progression rates highlight in a stark way the inequalities which still

exist, with students from disadvantaged schools almost twice as likely to fail to progress beyond the first year compared to those from fee-paying schools (Higher Education Authority, 2018a). Over the last few decades, there has been an increased recognition that the concept of successful “access” encompasses not only entry to higher education (HE) but critically participation and successful completion; in effect high-quality student engagement. Recognising the significance of this, in 2008, the International Association of Universities (IAU) adopted the principle that “access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty phrase” (International Association of Universities, 2008, p.1).

The topic of “student engagement” has enjoyed considerable attention in the literature since the mid-1990s, and its origin can be traced to Alexander Astin’s seminal work on student involvement (Astin, 1984). This attention can be justified as a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of “educationally purposive activities” (Trowler, 2010, p.2) and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement (Astin, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Pace, 1995).

International research over the past two decades has shown that student engagement with their higher education institution (HEI) matters, particularly in the first year and that student development is a cumulative process shaped by experiences both inside and outside the classroom (Tinto, 2002; Kuh, 2008). Similarly, there is an increasing recognition that successful engagement and progression relies not only on integration into the academic world but equally into the social aspects of the university, but the need for physical and social opportunities to facilitate social integration is often lacking (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). One of the key reasons why engagement with extracurricular activities is essential is that it is often related to an individual’s access to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Disengagement from extracurricular activities has been found to have far-reaching impacts on students beyond their time in HE (Redmond, 2006). Worryingly, however, a review of the international research on first-generation students, who are typically, though not exclusively, drawn from low SES groups, found that their involvement in student life lagged

behind that of other students (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011, Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). Likewise, authors such as Cooke *et al.* (2004), Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) and Walpole (2003) noted a tendency for non-traditional students to engage less in extracurricular activities, choosing to focus instead on their studies.

#### **1.4. Rationale and scope of the research**

Traditionally research and investigation have focused on the issues and the barriers to success faced by low SES students. There is a substantial body of international research, which addresses the issue of non-traditional and low SES students' experience of higher education (Reay, 1995, 2004, 2005, 2017; Zappone, 2007; Martin, 2009; McCoy *et al.*, 2010; McCoy and Byrne, 2011; Keane, 2015; Ferguson, 2017; Fleming, 2017; Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017). There is also a robust body of literature on the benefits to students of engagement with extracurricular activities (Astin, 1977; Boyer, 1990; Chickering, 1994; Kuh, 1995; Stuart *et al.*, 2008; Tomlinson, 2008; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Roulin and Bangerter, 2013a; Greenbank, 2015). Notwithstanding this, Stevenson and Clegg (2011, p. 244) highlight ECA as an under-researched area which must be "open to emerging research questions".

Nestled in the research on the barriers and challenges experienced by students from low SES backgrounds are references to the obstacles they face in their quest to engage in a meaningful way with the social or extracurricular aspects of higher education (Christie, Munro and Wager, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Purcell *et al.*, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). Reay (2018, p.9) refers to the "paradox" of students who sacrifice a social life to develop their academic habitus, unaware that extracurricular activities are important because they are often related to an individual's access to "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Coulson *et al.* (2018) highlight how the working-class students in their study struggled to engage with ECAs. The necessity for this cohort to work to fund their studies is also highlighted (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) often resulting in a scarcity of time to engage with extracurricular pursuits.

The rationale for undertaking this particular research stems from the fact that, to date, there has been no detailed investigation of low SES or access students who have successfully engaged with the extracurricular offerings in their university. To address this lacuna, this study deliberately seeks to focus on a small cohort (n=9) of access (low SES) students who were engaged in extracurricular activities while pursuing undergraduate study at Dublin City University. It presents their reflections on the personal and professional experience of that engagement and provides recommendations as to how an institutional culture, which facilitates and fosters engagement, might be developed.

### **1.5. Guiding questions for the research**

The guiding questions for the research were developed in order to address the main research question: How does sustained engagement with extracurricular activities impact on access students' experience of University? They are as follows:

- What motivates the initial and continued engagement of access students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with DCU programmes of study?
- What forms of capital are created through engagement in extracurricular activities, within and beyond DCU?
- What processes, practices and resources are needed to promote the creation of capital and other beneficial outcomes?

### **1.6. Site of the study**

With a mission “to transform lives and societies through education, research, innovation, and engagement” (Dublin City University, 2016, p.12), Dublin City University (DCU) is located on the North side of Dublin, Ireland. Created as the National Institute for Higher Education, Dublin (NIHE) in 1975, it enrolled its first students in 1980 and was elevated to university status in 1989 by statute. In September 2016, it completed the process of incorporating three other Dublin-based educational institutions: The Church of Ireland College of Education, Mater Dei Institute of Education and St Patrick's College. DCU now has a student population

of 17,000 with over 50,000 alumni. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees across five faculties: Science and Health, Engineering and Computing, Humanities and Social Science, DCU Business School and the Institute of Education. The first HEI to introduce an access programme, DCU has the most extensive programme in Ireland, with over 1,000 students admitted since 1989 (Dublin City University, 2018a). The socioeconomic profile of the student body is challenging to ascertain, as although information about SES on undergraduate entrants is collected annually on behalf of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the university is required to formally agree not to analyse that information, or use it alongside any other student information. What is known is that almost 30% of the student body are from non-traditional backgrounds, including mature, access, disability and distance. Currently, access students represent approximately 10.4%.

The participants in this study are all graduates of the Uaneen Module (Dublin City University, 2019b) in DCU, confirming that they were highly engaged in extracurricular activities while in university. They are also graduates of the DCU Access Programme, confirming their status as members of socio-economic groups that have been identified as having low rates of participation in HE. All but one are first-generation; however, three of the cohort had older siblings who had gone to third-level education before them, though not necessarily to university. They are, therefore, a subgroup of the widening participation cohort targeted by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) though they may belong to more than one of the target cohorts.

A variety of terms identifying students or participants permeates research on this topic. These include, but are not limited to, widening participation students; working-class students; access students; first-generation students; low socio-economic students and non-traditional students. The term widening participation refers to a broad cohort of students and encompasses all the other terms. The National Plan for equity of access to higher education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2015) has six main target groups: entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; first-time mature students; students with disabilities; part-time/flexible learners; further education and training award holders; and Irish Travellers. The plan also identifies subgroups that require particular

support, including lone parents, teenage parents and ethnic minorities. The term first-generation student (FGS) is also frequently used in the literature and although its precise meaning is sometimes disputed (Supiano, 2014), it is usually used to refer to a student whose parents have not obtained a higher education qualification (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013) or a student who is the first in their family to attend college. For consistency, the term low socio-economic status (SES) will be used throughout this study when referring to the status of the participants.

### **1.7. Contributions of the study**

This study aims to add to the corpus of knowledge research by exploring the experiences of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at one Irish university, focusing in particular on the social and relational aspect of their learning and development derived from activities outside the classroom. Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field will be used in the study to explore how engagement with extracurricular activities affected the experience of the study cohort during their studies and beyond.

Evident limitations of the study included the small scale of the research and the limited number of participants. The study involves a small cohort of graduates from one HEI, Dublin City University and the research findings do not claim to be representative of any population other than those involved. It is not an evaluation of the Uaneen Module, though such a study would be welcome, nor is it an attempt to measure the effectiveness or impact of the DCU Access Programme. This investigation does not set out to prove or disprove a testable hypothesis or to generalise the findings. Instead, it seeks to explore the experiences of a cohort of undergraduate students who were part of both an access programme and an academic credit-bearing extracurricular module. Despite these limitations as a small-scale study, it is hoped that it will generate contextualised knowledge to develop a greater understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Yin, 2014). While the findings may not be generalizable to all low SES students in DCU or any other university, the goal is to offer productive insights and interpretations, which will stimulate further research. The extent to which the findings of this study may be generalised to other areas is a matter of

judgement for those who become acquainted with them and may take the form of a “vicarious experience” which arises from reading a rich case account (Stake, 1995, p.38).

### **1.8. Overview of the chapters**

This research is presented to the reader in five chapters. Chapter one introduces the study, the aims and scope of the research and its contribution to the corpus of knowledge. It also confronts some of its limitations and concludes with an outline and brief discussion of the contents of the chapter.

Chapter two discusses the academic literature relevant to student engagement and extracurricular involvement. It then proceeds to present the literature on the topic of widening participation and access. This juxtaposition of the two bodies of research creates the landscape inhabited by the study’s participants and in so doing provides the context for the research. This chapter also introduces the concepts of Bourdieu and details their relevance for the study.

Chapter three discusses the methodological considerations of this research followed by a discussion of the epistemological, ontological and design aspects of the study. A rationale for the use of a qualitative case study approach to investigate the phenomenon is presented. The data collection process is detailed, and the application of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework is outlined. Samples of the data codes and themes generated by the NVivo qualitative data analysis package are included. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter four presents the findings of the research, focusing on the four key themes which resulted from the analysis: - “Expectations, motivations and desires”, “Settling and surviving”, “Engaging and developing” and “Creating capital”. Extracts from the semi-structured interviews and the Uaneen portfolios are included to provide an insight into the experience of the participants and to allow the reader to glimpse the realities and complexities of their lives.



Chapter five presents an analysis of the findings and includes commentary from the directors of two Access Programmes who were interviewed as part of the triangulation process. It includes recommendations for future research and suggestions on the conditions necessary to create an institution which ensures the success of all students, with particular reference to engagement with ECAs.

### **1.9. Conclusion**

*Verstehen* involves the capacity to see the world from another's perspective. The term, coined by Max Weber presumes that human beings must be understood differently than other objects of study (Tucker, 1965). This research draws on that *Verstehen* tradition and attempts to offer a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of students' experience of extracurricular activities. Such "thick description", as described by Geertz, seeks to describe an experience that is complex and multifaceted (Denzin, 1989). Any inquiry must not neglect these factors and recognise that the world is confused, impure and uncertain. Amid such confusion, the social inquiry does not aim to establish a global theory to hold everything in place. Instead, it aims little by little to build "a strategic knowledge" to move it forward (Foucault, 1980, p.145). It is the intention of this study to build a little "strategic knowledge".

## **Chapter 2     Reviewing the literature**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Trafford and Leshem (2008, p.68), when referring to a literature review, offer the following definition of literature: “The literature describes a specific body of knowledge (the corpus) that is recognised by its respective users”. Yin (1994, p.14) encourages investigators to review previous research to “develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic”. The intention is to provide a synthesised, analytical outline of a section of the corpus of knowledge, which exists about the two areas of investigation. It is not intended to provide a broad, exhaustive, analysis of the research on either student engagement or the debate surrounding widening participation, but rather to offer an inspection of where they intersect with this inquiry. Initially, the review will examine and present a synopsis of research relating to students’ engagement in university life, with a particular focus on engagement with extracurricular activities. It will include a brief introduction to the literature explicitly concerned with widening participation students’ involvement in ECAs. The landscape concerning widening participation in HE will, in turn, be scrutinised.

### **2.2. The University and Society**

The idea of a University’s or its students’ engagement with broader society is not a modern or novel one. Plato’s Academy - “the first university in Europe” considered education to be a means of producing good and virtuous citizens. In the early nineteenth century, John Henry Newman published “The Idea of a University” claiming

If then a practical end must be assigned to a university course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world. [...] A University training [...] aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste (Newman, 1905/2012. p.177).

The central role of civic responsibility continued to underpin the development of higher education in the 19th century. The inaugural President of the University of Chicago, William Harper (Harper, 1900), writing in 1900, contended that the role of the University was to defend democracy and to console and comfort the downcast.

When Boyer revisited this in 1996, he appears to suggest that this ideal had been lost and that it was being restricted by disciplinary boundaries. He claims that “the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed, and faculty get tenure, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation’s most pressing... problems” (Boyer, 1996, p.20). Similarly, Harkavy (2006, p.15) refers to a situation where “professors are duty-bound to serve the scholastic interests and preoccupations of their disciplines”. This practice, he contends inhibits the cooperative and interdisciplinary approach required to solve “highly complex, real-world problems”. Boyer’s (1996, p.27) dynamic view of scholarship broadens the roles and responsibilities of higher education in society, espousing a scholarship of engagement, which creates a particular climate where “the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other”.

### **2.3. Service Learning**

In the United States of America (USA), service-learning emerged as the modern-day manifestation of the engaged and civically responsible higher education institution. Service-learning has been in vogue in the USA for a quarter of a century since the National Community Service Act (1990) (US Government, 1990) legislated for it. Jacoby (1996, p.5) defines service-learning as a “form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection to achieve desired learning outcomes”. Bringle and Hatcher (1996, p.222) “view service-learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs”. They must also reflect on their service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Service-learning projects may, therefore, be viewed as a means to teach

students while simultaneously addressing critical social concerns. It involves students in activities, which serve the community all the while connecting these activities to learning goals for an academic course. The contention is that service-learning is an enriching experience for the student, allowing them “to develop new ways of thinking and acting that are integrated with their values” (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p.222) and it is considered a distinct activity from volunteering and community service.

Similarly, while service-learning shares many characteristics with internships and work placements, such as DCU’s INTRA placement scheme (<https://www.dcu.ie/intra/>), it should be distinct from them. Furco (1996) developed a continuum to locate these experiential educational experiences, with internships and placements on one end and volunteer activities on the other. Service-learning is positioned at the midpoint of this continuum, illustrating its unique quality of equally serving the student and the project, while simultaneously focusing on the service provided and the learning that is occurring.

Service-learning critically should include some element of reflection, allowing students to reflect on their experience and relate it to their course content. Wiegand and Strait (2000) contend that credit is given not for the service activity, but for the learning gained. They are not a lone voice in this contention. Reflection on the learning gained through the application of classroom knowledge is considered a critical component of service-learning. (Howard, 1993; Mettetal and Bryant, 1996). Dewey (1933) proposes that experience is as necessary as theory and his work provides a rational basis for the value of critical reflection in enhancing learning. Central to his educational philosophy are the following three principles: it should lead to personal growth; it must contribute to human conditions, and it must engage citizens with one another. Critically reflecting on the service-learning activities can enhance the students' learning, in addition to making sense of the academic content and develop their ability to make decisions in the future, which are informed by their experience. Service-learning is not without its risks and critics. Ethically, there are potential difficulties if students find themselves in situations without the requisite skills and expertise to cope adequately (Bordelon and Phillips, 2006). Kozol (2001) challenged those involved to examine their conscience and to focus on who benefits from the service-learning relationship. There is a

need to recognise that some service learning projects may not be helpful to the communities they are intended to serve (Manchester, 2001). Lieberman (2014) highlights how, twenty-five years after the implementation of the 1990 National Community Service Act (US Government, 1990) many universities are shifting the focus of service-learning from its original aim of preparing undergraduate students to become engaged citizens also to include meeting community needs and accomplishing graduate and undergraduate student learning outcomes.

#### **2.4. Beyond Service - Learning**

Although service-learning has traditionally dominated what is termed the learning outside the classroom climate in the USA, there is a recognition of the value of other forms of engagement. While Boyer's (1996) concept of student engagement referred to a partnership between the educational institution and society, equally benefitting the student and the community, there is an alternate view of student engagement. This view signifies a student's commitment to their studies and all that the experience has to offer, including out-of-class experiences. Harper and Quaye (2015, p.2) arrive at this "operational definition".

Student engagement is characterised as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Harper and Quaye, 2015, p.2).

They further encourage educators and administrators to be strategic and intentional about fostering conditions that compel students to make the most of college, both inside and outside the classroom.

There is a belief that a high-quality university experience occurs in circumstances where there are abundant opportunities for extracurricular activity (Markwell, 2007). So while students are ultimately responsible for their learning and their levels of engagement, it does require conditions, policies, and a culture generated by the institution and staff that enable and encourage students to get further involved (Kuh, 2008; McCormick, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2013). While recognising that the corpus of knowledge on student engagement reaches

significantly beyond simply out of classroom activities, as this study is concerned primarily with such engagement, this will be the focus of the next section.

## **2.5. “Outside the classroom” engagement**

Combining two perspectives, Kuh (2009, p.683) has defined student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (Kuh, 2001, 2009) (emphasis in original).

Over twenty years of research has identified that students who are engaged in the life of the college have a better quality experience than those at institutions where engagement is not promoted (Kuh, 2001). Engagement with college life is seen as valuable as it enables students to develop useful competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing skills, and teamwork and communication skills. Thus, engagement allows students to develop in meaningful ways. Kuh (2009) claims students gained more from their studies and other aspects of the college experience when they devoted more time and energy to certain tasks that required more effort than others -studying, interacting with their peers and teachers about substantive matters, applying their learning to concrete situations and tasks in different contexts, and so forth.

In earlier research, Kuh (1995) addressed the out-of-class experiences associated with student learning and personal development, concluding that students benefit in many ways from these experiences. In particular, he notes gains in critical thinking concerning organisational skills, expanding the concept of engagement beyond the academic environment and encompassing all aspects of college life. He concluded that “having a college degree is a hollow accomplishment if one does not acquire in the process the skills and competencies demanded by the 21st century” (p.ix). His conclusion concurs with other research on how the outside the classroom experience can contribute to valuable outcomes of higher education (Astin, 1977; Chickering and Riesser; 1993; Kuh, 1993; Bowen, 1997). These valuable outcomes include persistence and satisfaction, an increase in areas such as

social competence, autonomy, confidence, self-awareness, as well as an appreciation for diversity. In a study examining the extent to which involvement in extracurricular skills is a predictor of interpersonal skills, Rubin, Bommer and Baldwin (2002) suggested that extracurricular participation is associated with stronger communication, initiative, decision-making and teamwork skills. Engagement in extracurricular activity has also been shown to be essential for career development, employability and entrepreneurship (Pittaway *et al.*, 2015).

Kuh's (1995) study involved one hundred and forty students from eight different institutions in the USA, but he cautions about the transferability of the findings due to several limitations. His research concluded that many different out-of-class experiences have the potential to contribute to valued outcomes of college life and that these did not vary across gender or ethnicity. Since his study was cross-institutional, he could further conclude that the results varied with institutional type and that the ethos of the institution influenced the learning and personal development of its students. His definition of out-of-class was broad, and he applied a literal interpretation including travel, employment both on and off-campus, interaction with peers, interaction with staff outside of formal classroom engagement and institutional ethos in his understanding of the human condition.

## **2.6. The Irish Landscape**

The Universities Act (Government of Ireland, 1997) requires Irish universities "to promote the cultural and social life of society", and furthermore the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 considers engagement, along with research and teaching, to be one of the "three core roles of higher education" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.5). Irish universities have embraced this philosophy, and there is a wide range of engagement activities that can be highlighted, encompassing social, sport, business, cultural and civic which reinforces their role in the knowledge society.

To solidify this commitment to engagement, The Campus Engage National Network was established in 2007 (Campus Engage, 2019) following an award of direct funding from the

HEA Strategic Innovation Fund. This funding was in turn matched with indirect funding from the National University of Ireland Galway, DCU, University College Dublin, University of Limerick, and the National University of Ireland Maynooth. In 2012, its institutional base was broadened, moving from the initial start-up institutional phase of the five universities to a National Network that currently operates in eighteen HEIs.

Campus Engage was established to promote civic engagement as a core function of Higher Education on the island of Ireland, by enabling Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), their staff and students across all disciplines to engage with the needs of the communities they serve. A steering committee of representatives from across the higher education sector in Ireland drives their initiatives. The most recent significant development in this space occurred in June 2014 when the leaders of higher education institutions from across Ireland came together in Dublin Castle to sign the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement (Campus Engage, 2014). The signing of the Charter indicated a willingness to enhance further the links between institutions of higher education and society. Subsequently, the institutions have worked collaboratively to agree on a set of indicative actions that articulate and elaborate on the ambitions of the Charter.

There is an ongoing desire to keep the issue of engagement on the education agenda, and to this end, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) defines engagement at its simplest to mean:

Taking on civic responsibilities and cooperating with the needs of the community that sustains higher education -including business, the broader education system and the community and voluntary sector (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.74).

This definition espouses Boyer's (1990) view of scholarship incorporating and integrating discovery, teaching, engagement and integration. It views engagement as a core mission of higher education and suggests ways on how this may best be realised. Its summary



recommendations include the recognition of civic engagement by students through programme accreditation, where appropriate.

The critical agencies in higher education in Scotland have likewise produced a framework for student engagement. They state that it does not “present one definition or recommend any particular approach” (Sparqs, 2014, p.1), but aims to provide clarity in discussions and to establish a shared understanding. While addressing the broader landscape of student engagement, it also advocates involvement in clubs, societies and student volunteering as critical elements of that engagement.

## **2.7. Dublin City University**

Dublin City University’s (DCU) Current Strategic Plan 2017-22: “Talent, Discovery and Transformation” contains nine strategic objectives, including one with a particular focus on engagement, namely a commitment to “pursue active engagement with our communities” (Dublin City University, 2016, p.51). Its commitment under this strategic objective emphasises the importance of engagement with communities highlighting that “We are, and always have been, a highly engaged university, the very antithesis of the “Ivory Tower University” and it promises to introduce a range of initiatives to foster student engagement and volunteering.

Acknowledging its role is more than just preparing its students for employment, DCU established several initiatives to foster the development of fully rounded citizens within their communities, most notably, the Civic Engagement Strategy (Dublin City University, 2019a) and the Uaneen Module (Dublin City University, 2019b). These initiatives make explicit their commitment to a holistic student experience. Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of communities through the development of appropriate knowledge, skills and values. DCU’s Civic Engagement Strategy is focused on enhancing citizenship and community sustainability and fostering lifelong learning. The annual President’s Award for Engagement acknowledges the importance of civic engagement in DCU for staff and students.

## **2.8. Irish Survey of Student Engagement**

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2017 (Irish Social Science Data Archive, 2018) most recently undertaken in February-March 2017 saw 38,850 students from thirty institutions provide answers and opinions on a range of topics (Irish Social Science Data Archive, 2018). This survey of student engagement explores the amount of time and effort that students invest in their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, including volunteering and similar worthwhile endeavours. It also explores how effectively institutions facilitate, encourage and promote student engagement in activities linked to learning. The results of the survey are intended to add value at the institutional level for students and staff, as well as informing national policy.

In recognition of the importance attached to the out-of-classroom experience, the ISSE includes questions relating to the involvement in the community and voluntary work. It interprets student engagement as “the extent to which students actively avail of opportunities to involve themselves in educationally beneficial activities and the extent to which institutions enable, facilitate and encourage such involvement” (ISSE Survey, 2017, p.7). In 2016 and again in 2017, it included questions relating to students’ perceptions of their institution’s emphasis on attendance at political, economic, social or sporting events and how their educational experience armed them with the requisite personal skills and knowledge to become active and engaged citizens. The results from the relevant sections of the 2017 survey, which reported on responses from 38,850 students, representing 27.2% of the student body, are highlighted below.

*Table 2.1: How much has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills and personal development to be an informed and active citizen?*

	<b>All students</b>	<b>Undergraduate Year 1</b>	<b>Undergraduate Final Year</b>	<b>Postgraduate</b>
<b>Very little</b>	22.8%	23.8%	22.2%	21.3%
<b>Some</b>	34.5%	36.4%	33.6%	30.4%
<b>Quite a bit</b>	27.6%	26.6%	28.1%	29.4%
<b>Very much</b>	15.2%	13.3%	16.1%	18.8%

**Source:** The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) 2017, p.28.

*Table 2.2: Percentage of students who intend to or have been involved in community/voluntary work*

	<b>All students</b>	<b>Undergraduate Year 1</b>	<b>Undergraduate Final year</b>	<b>Postgraduate</b>
<b>Have not decided</b>	27.1%	29.5%	24.6%	25.2%
<b>Do not plan to do</b>	24.7%	15.5%	32.4%	36.8%
<b>Plan to do</b>	29.7%	40.7%	18.8%	19.3%
<b>Done or in progress</b>	18.5%	14.3%	24.3%	18.7%

**Source:** The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSI), 2017 p.27

Table 2.1 indicates that over 40% of the students surveyed believed that their educational experience equipped them with the skills necessary to be an informed and active citizen. Table 2.2 indicates that although only less than one in five is actively involved, another one third intends to become involved in some form of community or voluntary activity. When the responses of first-year undergraduate students are expanded separately, they show that over 40% intend to get involved; however, the figure for final year undergraduates is only just under 19%. Without further insight and more supporting qualitative data, it is difficult to conclude if this indicates a mismatch between intention and action or a fall off due to the more demanding academic workload associated with final year. Given the previously identified positive outcomes related to engagement, institutions must continue to promote such activities. Tables 2.3 and 2.4 outline the student perceptions of their institutions' creation of an environment conducive to involvement in the fuller out-of-classroom curriculum.

*Table 2.3: How much does your institution emphasise attending campus events, such as special speakers, cultural performances, sporting events, etc.?*

	All students	Undergraduate Year 1	Undergraduate Final Year	Postgraduate
<b>Very little</b>	18%	15.5%	20%	21.6%
<b>Some</b>	33.7%	31.6%	36.6%	33.7%
<b>Quite a bit</b>	32.6%	34.3%	31.3%	30.2%
<b>Very much</b>	15.7%	18.6%	12.1%	14.5%

**Source:** The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSI), 2017 p.25

*Table 2.4: How much does your Institution emphasise attending events that address important social, economic or political issues?*

	All students	Undergraduate Year 1	Undergraduate Final Year	Postgraduate
<b>Very little</b>	26.6%	23.5%	29.6%	26.9%
<b>Some</b>	36.4%	35.7%	37.6%	36.1%
<b>Quite a bit</b>	26.2%	27.6%	24.5%	25.4%
<b>Very much</b>	11.2%	13.2%	8.3%	11.6%

**Source:** The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSI), 2017 p.25

Combining the results of the figures above (Table 2.3 and 2.4) it can be determined that almost half of students believe that their institution emphasises to some extent the importance of attending social events on campus, although only 37% believe this to be the case concerning important political, social or economic issues. Overall, the salient point is that only four out of ten students feel that their institution provides an environment conducive to a broad range of engagement.

## **2.9. Engagement through Extracurricular Activities (ECAs)**

Returning briefly to the subject of the benefits of outside the classroom experience it is useful to reiterate that research has demonstrated the positive contribution it may have to the

outcomes of higher education (Astin, 1977; Chickering and Riesser; 1993; Kuh, 1993; Bowen, 1997). One such manifestation of an outside the classroom experience is involvement in extracurricular activities. While it is challenging to locate a clear definition of ECA in either policy or academic literature, Stevenson and Clegg (2011, p.232) offer a somewhat limited explanation as “cultural, voluntary and sporting activities” organised through student societies. Stuart, Lido and Morgan (2011) utilise a broader definition in their study of the impact of engagement with ECA on the student experience, including not only those activities organised through student clubs and societies, but also paid and voluntary employment, family commitments, religious pursuits’ activity and internet activities. Other studies have attempted to not only offer some clarity on what constitutes ECA but also to investigate the implications of engagement with ECAs for graduates, the educational institution, employers and society at large (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott, 2010; Stevenson, Sealy and Clegg, 2012). Rubin, Bommer and Balwin, (2002, p.441) suggest that extracurricular activity is “a place where students look to utilise, and perhaps refine and develop, their interpersonal skills”. It is clear, therefore, that there continues to be ambiguity in the literature as to what constitutes ECAs, beyond a general acceptance of traditional pursuits such as sporting, cultural and voluntary and community activities. The inclusion of paid work and caring roles are less clear-cut. Given the difficulty in arriving at a clear and unambiguous definition, it is not surprising that the reported numbers who participate are variable and are dependent on what forms of ECAs are recognised. In the absence of a clear-cut definition, the meaning is often described in examples, descriptors or by an “assumed common-sense definition” (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott, 2010.) Furthermore, not all ECAs are valued equally, and there may be assumptions made about involvement in particular pursuits or pastimes, which are not accurate. A comprehensive literature review conducted by The Clute Institute (Bartkus *et al.*, 2012) proposed a formal definition and provided guidelines for the measurement of extracurricular activities. Their research also considered co-curricular activities and resulted in an interpretation, which differentiated between direct and indirect extracurricular activities, placing them on a continuum ranging from those closely related to a student’s curriculum to those, that are not in any way connected. Despite the debate surrounding a definition, they concluded that there was no universally or generally accepted meaning.

## **2.10. ECAs and employability**

Notwithstanding the lack of a generally accepted definition, engagement with non-academic pursuits is not only beneficial to student development, but it is considered to be highly valued by employers (Tomlinson, 2008; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Roulin and Bangerter, 2013a; Greenback, 2014). Students are increasingly anxious to add value to their degree to gain a competitive advantage. Brown and Hesketh's (2004) study has shown that employers attribute declining importance to academic credentials and instead attach increasing importance to personal skills and competencies and they increasingly seek graduates who display a range of individual, performance and organisational capabilities. Employability is increasingly about gaining "soft" skills and capabilities, they note, which need to be packaged in a way, that demonstrates the range of competencies required for elite employment (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, p.36). When the recruitment and employment process is viewed through the lens of employers, there is some evidence that they do indeed look beyond the degree and seek a wider range of competencies, skills and attributes that are gleaned in an environment other than the classroom or the library (Rubin, Bommer and Baldwin, 2002; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). The research would point indisputably towards the conclusion that at the very least, some focus on extracurricular involvement is warranted. It is crucial to look beyond mere participation and examine what the individual has gained in relation to skill practice and development. Employers expect graduates to "deploy narratives of employability" to explicitly indicate how ECAs helped them gain competencies that are valuable in a particular role (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013a, p.8). In other words, to derive maximum benefit, graduates must sufficiently align their ECAs to the specifics of roles and organisations and make explicit how such activities support their application and suitability for such positions. Notions of employability have changed and developed and, as Garsten and Jacobsson (2003, p.2) have suggested, there has been a "shift from a systematic view of the labour market to a focus on the individuals and their qualities". Crucially, therefore students need not only to state their involvement they also need to deliberately and precisely communicate their achievements to recruiters and potential employers (Sealey, Stevenson and Clegg 2011; Clark *et al.*, 2015).

### **2.11. Beyond the employability agenda**

Discourse on involvement must move beyond the employability agenda (Ward, 2012) and focus on the wider benefits and positive outcomes of engagement with ECAs. Although student-focused research has begun to emerge (Willis, 2011), Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2010) note that few studies explore ECA engagement and students' beliefs and perceptions of involvement in detail, leaving many questions unanswered about the student experience. Some of the more recent student-focused research in the UK does provide clues as to the motivations of student involvement beyond the possibility of gaining valuable transferable skills to enhance their employability. Other motivating factors include having fun, social responsibility and contributing to society (Quinlan, 2011). Thompson *et al.* (2013) describe ECAs as a way of coping with stress and anxiety, while Muldoon (2009) highlights the development of valuable interpersonal and life skills. There is also some evidence that involvement in ECAs impacts positively on retention rates based on the premise that participation in an extracurricular activity may expand students' comfort zones and develop their planning and organisational skills, thereby lessening the factors contributing to early dropout (Muldoon, 2009).

### **2.12. Why accreditation?**

It is well established that universities and other higher education institutions increasingly encourage students to participate in clubs and societies and other extracurricular activities to enhance their employability. Embracing the concept of lifelong learning, Jackson (2008) suggests that knowledge may result from the diverse experiences that a learner encounters during their lives. This inclusive concept recognises that students can learn across a variety of learning sites more or less simultaneously. In recognition of this more recently, many institutions are now providing opportunities for students to have such activity formally accredited or recognised in other ways to enable them to evidence their "employability skills". Some examples include the Personal Development Profile at the University of Leeds (<http://hr.leeds.ac.uk/>); the Advantage Award at the University of Nottingham ([www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/advantageaward/index.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/advantageaward/index.aspx)); the York Award at

the University of York ([www.york.ac.uk/students/work-volunteering-careers/skills/york-award/](http://www.york.ac.uk/students/work-volunteering-careers/skills/york-award/)); the Excel Program at Northwood University in the United States of America ([www.northwood.edu/campus-life/excel-program](http://www.northwood.edu/campus-life/excel-program)) and, in Australia, the Deakin Advantage Certificate at Deakin University ([www.deakin.edu.au/course/master-business-administration](http://www.deakin.edu.au/course/master-business-administration)) and the New England Award at the University of New England ([www.unen.edu.au/current-students/graduation/new-england-award](http://www.unen.edu.au/current-students/graduation/new-england-award)). In an attempt to standardise the process, The Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) was launched in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008 (<http://www.hear.ac.uk/>). It enables HEIs to provide a detailed picture of student achievement throughout a students' time at university, including academic work, extracurricular activities, prizes and employability awards, voluntary work and offices held in student union clubs and societies that have been verified by the institution. There are one hundred and sixty-four higher education institutions in the UK ([www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats)) and, currently, ninety of them are implementing or planning to implement the HEAR. Beyond establishing that the take-up has not been universal, it proved difficult to source any meaningful qualitative data on the success or otherwise of the scheme.

So why the need for an Award? Moreover, why the need for an assessment? An assessed award offers the opportunity to engage with a process, which assures quality and demonstrates that a required standard has been achieved, thereby adding credibility to the activity. Students may also value institutional recognition in terms of future employability, and awards may positively influence the way students view the value of their participation (Thompson *et al.*, 2013). Opportunities for reflection, which are typically critical elements of these award schemes, also enhance the process and provide structured opportunities for making sense of experience, particularly if supported by a mentor or significant other. So while award schemes may be diverse (Ward, 2012), they are usually underpinned by an emphasis on reflection, a process which enables students to draw on and make sense of their experiences. It also facilitates the articulation of their skills. Reflection is vital, as undergraduates do not always know how to draw out the relevance of, or make connections between different contexts. Without this, a student is unlikely to be able to assess how far they have come in developing their employability and what they may need to do to improve



it further (Houghton and Bagley, 2000). Moon (2004) supports this activity, highlighting that it is essential to provide opportunities for reflection on, and evaluation of, the learning experiences that have already taken place. She considers it a vital graduate skill, which can contribute to employability.

In keeping with its innovative and entrepreneurial philosophy, in 2001 DCU was the first HEI in Ireland to introduce a module, which formally recognises and rewards involvement in ECAs- the Uaneen module. Although unique in the Irish context at the time, it is now only one of a growing number of formal reward and recognition schemes internationally. All of these programmes are in addition to the university's structured programmes of study, and participation is voluntary. They aim to add value to degrees by conferring institutional recognition of participation in a range of extracurricular activity. A previous study has shown that students appreciate the recognition afforded to them by the very existence of the award, suggesting that the institutional support and appreciation can positively influence their perception of that activity (Muldoon, 2009).

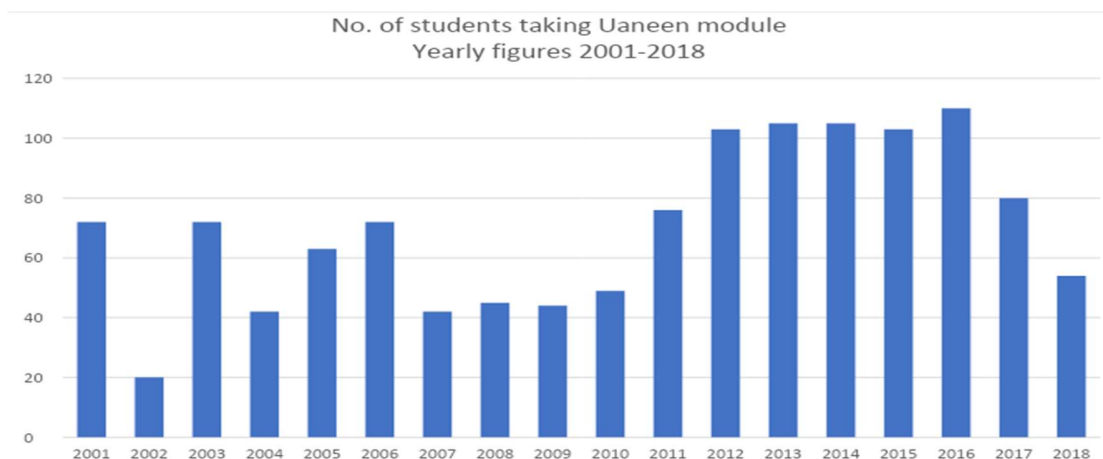
### **2.13. Development of the Uaneen Module**

The Uaneen module was initially designed to recognise and reward extracurricular activities which contribute to students' holistic development which encompasses not only academic knowledge but also the development of skills such as problem-solving and analysis while also contributes to students' moral and emotional growth (Quinlan, 2011). Named in memory of Uaneen Fitzsimons, a DCU Alumnus who had carved out a successful media career before she died tragically in a car accident in November 2000, it was in development at the time of her death. It is currently available as a five European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) module to all final year DCU students. Students who have an elective module option in the last year of their programme of study may elect to take the module (UM404) for credit. Others in their final year either at the undergraduate or postgraduate level may enrol in the non-contributing Module (UM405). Hence, in any cohort of Uaneen participants, one finds a mixture of students attempting to gain a core academic credit and other seeking additional credits. Currently, twenty of the one hundred and ten

DCU programmes offer it as a module (UM404) which contributes to the final grade for those who wish to participate.

First offered in 2001, the initial aim of the module was to recognise the contribution engagement outside of the classroom adds to a students' learning and to make visible and reward the many soft or transferable skills which students acquired by engaging in extracurricular activities. At that time, although such skills were increasingly seen as necessary graduate attributes, it was still relatively unusual for them to be incorporated formally into programmes of study. The fledgling Uaneen module sought to acknowledge the acquisition of such valuable skills outside of the core curriculum and to provide students with additional recognition for them. The long-term view looked towards accreditation for the learning derived from such activities. Such accreditation was to follow.

In a significant development, 2004 saw the awards formally approved by DCU's Academic Council, albeit for additional credit only but just two years later in 2006, following approval by the same body, the Uaneen module was formally approved as an elective module for students in their final year of study. This formal approval by the University's academic governing council means that any programme, which offers elective modules in its final year, may include the Uaneen module as one of those electives. Students' Uaneen module grades are now incorporated into their overall grade and recorded on their transcript of results. Figure 2.1 below presents the numbers of final year students who have graduated with the Module since 2001.



*Figure 2.1: Numbers of Uaneen Module graduates 2001-2018. Source: DCU Registry Department.*

Moon's (2004) identification of reflection as a critical graduate skill has previously been highlighted, and as the module developed and was refined, the importance of providing an opportunity for reflection in the module was recognised. Although traditionally associated with pastoral professions such as nursing and teaching, reflection has steadily grown in importance in other disciplines (Schon, 1983). Instruction in reflective skills is beginning to appear across the curriculum (Helyer and Kay, 2015), with the compilation of reflective journals, logs, diaries or portfolios an increasingly common element of assessment. Reflection on action (Schon, 1983) is encouraged alongside exploring thoughts and feelings and the ability to reflect is highlighted as being indicative of deep and meaningful learning (King, 2002) as well as with the acquisition of higher-order thinking skills. Reflection is now a core element of the Module and represents thirty per cent of the overall grade awarded.

The definition of reflection which most aptly captures the expectation of what is required for the module is Ryan's (2013, p.145) twofold definition: (a) making sense of experience in relation to self, others, and contextual conditions; and (b) reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit. Students presenting for the Uaneen module are required to engage in deep reflection to make sense of the professional and personal development they have gained through their extra-curricular engagement. This reflective element forms part of the required 4,000-word portfolio, which also must include a log of activities detailing the level of involvement, leadership roles held and accomplishments. The

portfolios uploaded via the University's LOOP system in early May, in line with other deliverables for Spring or Summer assessment. The evaluation rubric (Appendix A) is designed to allow for the evaluation of four distinct categories, each with a maximum score as indicated, namely: level of involvement (20 marks); skills and competencies gained (30 marks); self-reflection, ethics and motivation (30 marks) and overall presentation (20 marks).

### **2.13.1. Learning Outcomes of the Module**

In 2010, under the Academic Framework for Innovation (AFI), the module learning outcomes were aligned with the University's overall award learning outcomes (Dublin City University, 2010). These outcomes are outlined below and claim that on successful completion of the module, the learner will be equipped to:

- Collect and synthesise information required to develop a unique learning portfolio, which is self-crafted and self-directed.
- Exercise judgement to critically select activities, which contribute to learning.
- Apply learning to complex societal problems and identify, investigate, formulate and advocate solutions.
- Determine their role in the wider society and recall information, concepts and theories, which are essential to building a democratic society.
- Demonstrate leadership and self-reliance while using an objective approach to problem solving.
- Justify their values, motivations and passions to display a personal value system to create a just and democratic society.

### **2.13.2. Scope of activities**

It is believed that all extracurricular activity (ECA) enables the development of a variety of skills that complement those developed through formal learning. As a result, the range of activities, which the Uaneen module incorporates, is not definitive or limited. As the literature would suggest, the definition of ECAs is not rigid, and students are encouraged to check with their mentor or the module coordinator if they feel their activity may be outside

the scope of what may be credited. Clegg, Stevenson and Williot (2010, p.617) refer to an “assumed common-sense definition” of ECAs and how more often than not they are defined by what they term common sense descriptors. Such is the case with the Uaneen Module students where extracurricular activities typically include involvement with university-based or other external clubs and societies, competitive and recreational sports, hobbies and community and voluntary activity. Events may take place in the university setting, in the community local to the university or in the students’ home community. The skills gained from this involvement are in line with those identified in the research (Stuart *et al.*, 2008). These span a broad spectrum from merely learning new things to effectively running and developing a club or fundraising event, managing events, fulfilling personal and team achievements, and sporting excellence. Participation can also have an impact on the development of confidence and effective communication skills.

### **2.13.3. Supporting the student**

The Uaneen module is a self-crafted, self-directed module and is the only such credit-bearing module offered in DCU. The lack of formal or timetabled classes or lectures requires students enrolled on the module to be supported and guided in their activities and the preparation of their portfolio in alternative ways. This guidance takes the form of four to five interactive workshops delivered during the academic year supported by a well-established mentoring programme. The workshops cover the following topics: Introduction to the Uaneen module; reflective practice; reflective writing and academic writing. Workshop facilitators are members of the University academic community who give of their time voluntarily.

Moon (2006) suggests that by slowing down the pace of learning, reflective writing improves student learning, increases the sense of ownership in learning and contributes to the acknowledgement of the role of emotion in learning. Besides, it provides a learning experience that deals with situations or conditions, which are not always straightforward or predictable. Its value in making sense of and recognising the learning in ECAs pursuits is self-evident. The ability to reflect and to write reflectively is not always straightforward or

achievable for many students who may view it as an abstract concept which is difficult to practice and which is often presented in a “mechanistic way” (Wong, 2016, p.5). It is against this background that the Uaneen module mentors operate. Tomlinson (1995) best defines the mentoring provided by academic and professional university staff role in this context. He views a mentor as a coach who challenges and stimulates but also as a facilitator who supports. Students are required to meet with their mentors two to three times during the academic year.

#### **2.14. Extracurricular activities and widening participation students**

Earlier studies (Walpole, 2003; Cooke *et al.*, 2004; Crozier *et. al.*, 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016) which explored the engagement of widening participation groups in ECAs have expressed concern that these groups do not enjoy equal access. Consequently, they are unable to avail of and benefit from valuable interaction with other students in clubs or groups, volunteer associations or athletic teams. This lack of access to the complete offerings of higher education excludes widening participation groups from acquiring the many advantages previously outlined.

Additionally, Tinto’s (2017) claim that the more integrated the student is into the fabric of the institution the more likely they are to complete appears to be extremely salient in the case of lower SES students. He identified a sense of belonging (as well as high self -efficacy and the perceived value of the curriculum) as being critical to student persistence. Involvement in University clubs or societies or volunteering with a university-based group would seem to offer a sense of belonging, so any barriers or reluctance to participate potentially further disadvantages this group. The existence of barriers, however, constituted, has obvious implications for their ability to benefit from the valuable engagement which, as detailed earlier, may enhance their employability, grow their network and provide critical opportunities for personal growth and development. The requirement to work long hours for financial reasons for lower SES groups or the existence of conflicting family responsibilities for mature (Bruen, 2014) or other non-traditional students may explain their lack of involvement. It may also be the case cultural, sporting and social activities are sacrificed in

order to focus intently on achieving academic success in their chosen field (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Combined with this there may be an under appreciation of the intrinsic and extrinsic value of engagement with extracurricular activities. Most likely, it is a combination of some or all of these factors. Regardless of the reasons, the outcome remains unchanged. Widening participation students are more likely to graduate from higher education lacking the valuable social networks and social capital, which may help them, secure meaningful employment. Research from the University of Warwick (Purcell *et al.*, 2012) indicates that students from a routine and manual background who had experience of extra-curricular activities were more likely to be in a graduate job than those from a similar background who did not have such experience. They suggest that participation can act as an ‘intervening factor’ (Purcell *et al.*, 2012, p.130) to enable those from less advantaged backgrounds to gain access to similar opportunities as more advantaged graduates. Paradoxically, those students who have most to gain from such engagement may, because of their personal, social, family or economic circumstances, be excluded from such involvement.

The following section briefly introduces the challenges faced by widening participation groups to engage with the broad educational agenda offered in HEIs. A review of the literature on the general widening participation scenario follows.

### **2.15. Massification of Higher Education**

In 2016, the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education published its report, known colloquially as the Cassells’ Report (Higher Education Authority, 2016). In it, they outlined the role of higher education (HE) in Irish society. It, they contend, adds “to the understanding of, and hence the flourishing of, an integrated social, institutional, cultural, and economic life” (p.iii). Participation in higher education contributes to individual fulfilment and the collective good. Through its pursuit of knowledge, it allows for the creation of meaning in relation to a host of activities, such as art and politics (Gilligan, 2007) and results in significant economic gains (Browne, 2010; Clancy, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2018).

The number of students in publicly funded higher education institutions has increased by approximately 2% per annum since 1960 (Figure. 2.2). In 1965, there were just 25,000 students in higher education. By 1976, there were 31,000 and forty years later in 2016, there were almost 223,000 (Figure 2.3). With the Irish population and, in particular, the number of young people increasing, the system is expected to grow by around 25% to 2030 to simply maintain participation rates (Higher Education Authority, 2017).

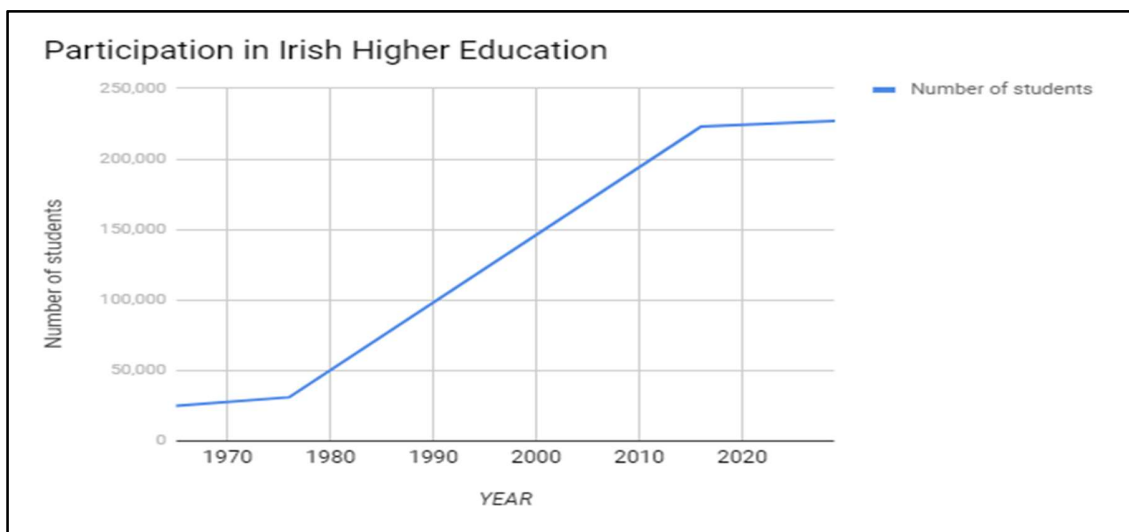


Figure 2.2: Projected participation rates in Irish Higher Education 1970-2020 Source: Higher Education Authority (2017).

McGuinness *et al.* (2012) estimate that based on current participation rates and demographic projections, the number of potential undergraduate entrants to higher education is expected to grow from 41,000 in 2010/2011 to 44,000 in 2019/20 and to just over 51,000 by 2029/2030.



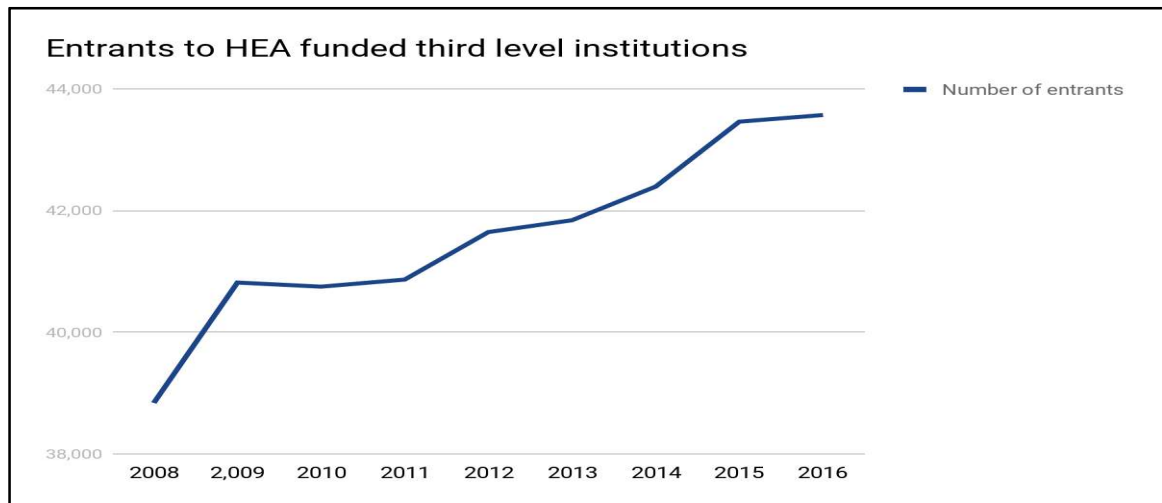


Figure 2.3: Entrants to HEA funded third-level institutions 2008-2016 Source: Higher Education Authority (2017).

There is no disputing the rapid expansion in the numbers attending Higher Education in the last half-century and a noticeable accompanying rise in educational attainment. Arguably, it may be the case that a rising tide has not lifted all boats. Downes and Gilligan (2007, p. 463) claim that “educational disadvantage in Ireland has a long, embedded history and tradition” and similar more recent research suggests that this social inequality in higher education participation continues to persist in Ireland (Denny, 2014). It is troubling that although the proportion of the student body coming from lower socio-economic groups has risen, the class of non-manual workers (Higher Education Authority, 2008) is an exception. Furthermore, this group is unique in showing a decline in HE entry rates over time (McCoy *et al.*, 2010). Research has identified a number of barriers to the educational progression of low SES students. These include underperformance at primary and second level (Keane, 2015, Smyth, McCoy and Kingston, 2015), long-term processes of educational (dis)engagement, problems with school organisation and process (Smyth and Banks, 2012), impoverished availability of information and guidance (McCoy *et al.*, 2010). The structure of the admissions process and the high-stakes nature of the terminal exam (Higher Education Authority, 2010, 2015; Keane, 2015) have also been identified as potential barriers.

Tellingly, statistics from the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 indicate that participation of those from the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups is at 26%, while there is practically full participation by those from the higher professional socio-economic group (Higher Education Authority, 2015). In 2014, Higher Education Authority data pointed to disparities between wealthy and poor areas when it comes to participation in third-level education. The figures showed stark differences in participation between regions of Dublin, with a participation rate of 99% in the affluent Dublin 6 postal district, compared to a rate of just fifteen per cent in the less economically advantaged Dublin 17 district (Humphreys, 2014). An earlier study of admissions to universities by postal district (Clancy, 2001) found that while there was a 77% admission rate in Foxrock, a wealthy-middle-class suburb in Dublin, there was only a seven per cent admission rate in Ballyfermot, a working-class suburb just twenty kilometres away. These figures provide evidence that although overall participation rates have increased across all groups, unequal access persists. For the most part, patterns of improved participation mask continued social inequality in access and entry to HE. To summarise, neither the overall expansion in participation nor the removal of tuition fees in 1996 has brought about a significant reduction in social inequality in HE access. Even in a landscape of increased provision the drive to truly tackle social inequality requires that a host of social factors which impact on participation and progression at second level and HE must be addressed (McGuinness *et al.*, 2012).

## **2.16. History of Widening Participation initiatives**

Internationally in the 1960s, there were early intervention programmes to tackle unequal access to education as a means of dealing with disadvantage. Notably, these included the Head Start Program in the United States (United States Department of Health and Human Sciences, 2019) and in Britain, the identification of and the allocation of extra resources to educational priority areas (Kellaghan, 2001). In recent years in the United States of America, the Gates Millennium Scholars program (Gates Millennium Scholars Program, 2019) has invested €1 billion in 20,000 first-generation students from low-income backgrounds, facilitating their access to higher education. Leading universities in the USA, historically the

preserve of the wealthy elite, have also embraced the ideal of education for all and not only for those who can afford it. Princeton President Eisgruber, speaking in 2018, claimed that they aspire to be the leader in socio-economic diversity and that their financial aid and admissions policies are now structured to achieve such an aim. Twenty-eight per cent of their current student body is composed of first-generation low-income students. Nonetheless, their student body still does not represent the general US population (CBS Television Network, 2018). In Ireland, the work of the Educational Research Centre (ERC) has targeted issues of educational disadvantage since its establishment in 1966. It is involved in an ongoing evaluation of programmes aimed at dealing with disadvantage, and the Centre recommends measures to improve the opportunities available to children who are identified as being most at risk of non-progression (Weir *et al.*, 2017). The past fifty years have witnessed the genesis of schemes, policies and projects implemented to deal with educational disadvantage (Zappone, 2007) and the Irish state during that time has produced a large body of policies concerning HE access and widening participation (WP) (Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming, 2017). “Promoting equality of opportunity in higher education is a national priority that has been fundamental to the role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) since its foundation in the early 1970s” (Higher Education Authority, 2015). Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming (2017) provide a detailed outline, extensive discussion and analysis of all such policies. For this study, an abridged account appears below.

*Table 2.5 Details of policies to promote widening participation 1959-2016*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Date of Publication</b>
The First Programme for Economic Expansion	1959
Investment in Education	1963
The HEA Act	1971
Report of the Commission on Adult Education (The Kenny report)	1983
Education for a Changing World: Green Paper on Education	1992

Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education	1995
Report of the steering committee on the future development of HE: Based on a study of needs to the year 2015	1995
The Universities Act	1997
The Education Act	1998
Qualifications (Education and Training) Act	1999
The National Development Plan 2000-2006	1999
Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education	2000
Access and Equity in HE: An international perspective on issues and strategies (Skilbeck and Connell Report)	2000
Programme for Prosperity and Fairness	2000
University Challenged (Skilbeck Report)	2001
Achieving equity of access to HE in Ireland. Action Plan 2005-2007	2004
Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion	2005
The Institutes of Technology Act	2006
Towards the best education for all: An evaluation of access programmes in HE in Ireland	2006
National Plan for equity of access to HE 2008-2013	2008
The National Recovery Plan 2011-2014	2011
The National Strategy for Higher Education 2013-2030 (The Hunt Report)	2011
National Plan for equity of access to HE 2015-2019	2015
Irish Survey of Student Engagement	2015
Investing in Ambition: A strategy for funding HE (The Cassell's Report)	2016

Source: Adapted from Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming (2017, pp.51-52).

A cursory examination of the timeline indicates that in the decade between the mid- 1990's and the mid-2000s there was an "intense flurry of activity around HE and access" (Loxley, Finnegan and Fleming, 2017, p.52). Access, accordingly, has become an integral part of how HE understands itself and how it explains the value of what it does for society as a whole and has become embedded in HE policy (Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017) cementing its position as a fundamental human right (Lynch, 1999). Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley (2017) identify the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2001) as a solid starting point for substantial policy initiatives on the access journey. It outlined the need to make changes around access into HE not only for disadvantaged students but also for mature students, advocating adult-friendly policies and flexible entry, delivery and accreditation. This report contained seventy-eight recommendations, targeted not only at socioeconomically disadvantaged students but also at mature students and at students with additional learning needs.

#### **2.17. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools (DEIS)**

In an attempt to alleviate the disadvantage experienced by many Irish students, the Irish Government implemented the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Disadvantaged Schools, 2005) Action Plan. The intention was to focus upon the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, spanning preschool through to second-level education. It proposed that schools operate a tailored approach to assist those with the highest concentration of disadvantage.

Currently, there are several similar and concurrent plans that aim to specifically tackle and improve the circumstances of those at risk from educational disadvantage. The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b), contains five goals, one of which involves 'Improving learning experience, learning outcomes and progression for those at risk of educational disadvantage' (p.8). One of the stated actions of this plan is to focus specifically on targets in line with the third National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019. It prioritises five goals to be delivered throughout the Plan. These are: to mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs; to assess the

impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education; to gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us; to build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education, and to develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring. In addition, six key target socio-economic groups are identified in the Plan. These comprise entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; first time, mature student entrants; students with disabilities; part-time/flexible learners; further education award holders and Irish Travellers. This study will focus on students from a socio-economic background with low participation rates.

The most recently launched iteration of the DEIS plan 2107, replaces the original 2005 Action Plan (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a). The revision sets targets for future intervention in the critical area of social inclusion in education policy and is performance managed to allow DEIS become ‘more fully [become] a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion’ (p.6). Delivering equality of access is also prioritised in the Cassells Report as one of the four significant challenges facing higher education in contemporary Ireland. It states, “Access to the opportunities in universities and Institutes of Technology (IoTs), of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, needs to be improved” (p.x).

The issue of educational disadvantage among childhood learners is a complex one. To be effective, an integrated approach to support parents and communities to produce a positive environment that fosters children’s social, linguistic and mathematical skills from an early age (Bleach, 2013) is required. There are other challenges too which need to be addressed, in particular, arguably the relatively poor performance of the education system to foster lifelong learning. Acknowledging that this is a complex and multi-faceted topic, it is beyond the scope of this study to cover all relevant areas. Consequently, the focus will be on equality of opportunity in the HE or third- level arena and in particular on students who enter the HE system through HEAR or other Access routes.

## **2.18. Defining Access**

Skilbeck and Connell (2000) define “access” as a process where learners may start a programme of education and training where previous knowledge, skill or competence is recognised. The concept of enabling access and increasing participation is only one aspect of the issue, and meaningful student engagement and equitable student retention and student performance are equally crucial for a fair and equal third-level sector (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000; Fleming and Gallagher, 2003). The European Council definition, as reported by Fleming and Gallagher (2003), considers access to be:

The widening of participation in good quality higher education to all sectors of society; the extension of participation to include currently under-represented groups; and a recognition that participation extends beyond entry to successful completion (Council of Europe, 1999).

## **2.19. Dublin City University - Access Pioneers**

Dublin City University gained its university status as recently as 1989 and is one of Ireland’s two newest Universities. It has been a trailblazer in terms of access programmes. From its inception, it has sought to actively engage and provide equal access to all groups within the wider community. In 1989, the year it was granted university status, its Governing Body voted in favour of implementing a local initiative aimed at addressing the low numbers of students entering third-level from one of its closest neighbourhoods in North Dublin – Ballymun. Because of this innovative vote, The Ballymun Initiative for Third-Level Education (BITE) was founded in 1989 in conjunction with several key community groups. Ita Tobin, (then) Head of DCU Access, speaking in 2011 on the 21st anniversary of BITE, explained: “It was the first time that there was a clear and transparent route for disadvantaged students into higher education, and the first time that these students could get in on a different system”. In 1990, six students entered DCU through the BITE initiative. Today, over 1,300 access scholars, representing every county in Ireland, study at undergraduate and postgraduate level across the University (Dublin City University, 2018a). Figure 2.4 below depicts the growth in enrolment in undergraduate courses since 1999, from 76 in 1999 to

1,261 in the academic year 2018/19. Despite this impressive growth, access students still only represent just over 10% of the total undergraduate student population.

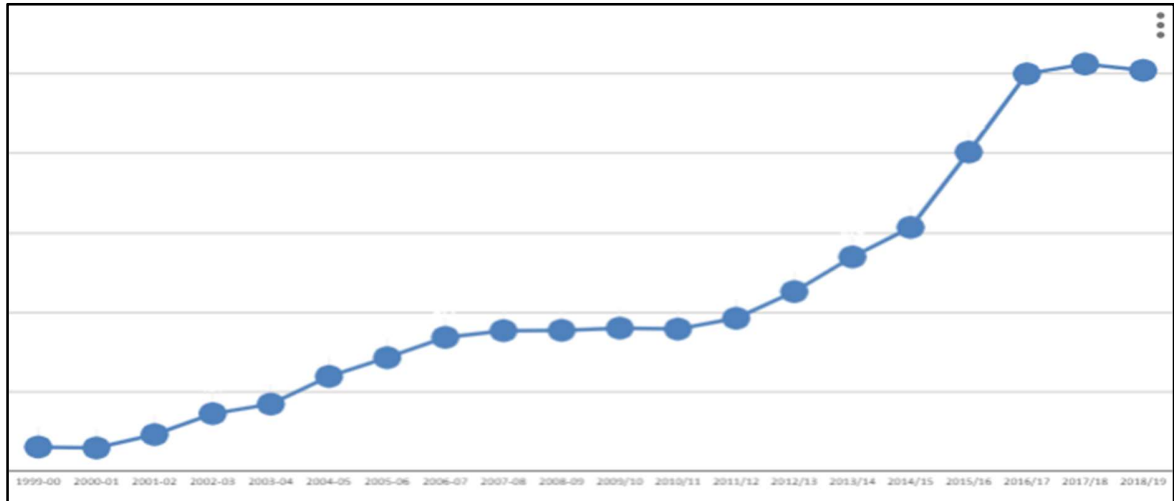


Figure 2.4: Numbers of students entering the DCU Access programme 1999-2018: Source DCU Access Department.

McCoy *et al.* (2010, p.155) propose that access and participation need to be viewed “as the outcome of a longer-term process of educational engagement. Educational experiences, particularly in secondary school, play a central role in the longer-term educational trajectories”. McKay and Devlin (2014) also speculate that it is difficult to imagine an agenda concerned with widening the participation of low socioeconomic groups without the involvement of the schools. In recognition of the need to engage students well in advance of higher education entry age, DCU Access rolls out initiatives to between 8,000 and 10,000 primary and secondary school students in their linked Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) yearly (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). The DEIS programme provides additional supports, such as higher grants and extra teachers, to schools under its umbrella and more than one in four, a total of 198, Irish post-primary schools have a DEIS designation. This designation is linked to the socio-economic profile of pupils, and while schools that are not designated as DEIS may have many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, DEIS schools have higher concentrations. All DEIS schools have access to a third-level access scheme and DCU engages with forty-one primary and twenty-one



secondary schools drawn from its hinterland and which are located predominantly in those postal districts which have some of the lowest higher education participation rates in the country. To illustrate the inequalities, Dublin 17, a large low SES area adjacent to DCU, has a progression rate from secondary school to third-level education of just 15%, compared to 99% in the affluent Dublin 6 area.

The establishment of the DCU Access Programme in 1989 was pioneering, and in the few years, which followed, other Universities followed its lead. Within a decade, other Irish institutions had developed programmes to encourage and facilitate underrepresented groups to enter and to navigate their way through third-level education. All offered and still offer, a combination of relaxed entry requirements, pre and post-entry support and outreach programmes. All too, have designated annual intake target numbers ([accesscollege.ie](http://accesscollege.ie) 2018). It is worth noting that the Programme at Trinity College differs slightly from the others. In 1998, it initially offered an alternative access route by providing a foundation course that helped develop the skill set necessary for accessing higher education. The programme was expanded in 2004 to offer a certificate in liberal arts for participating students who wished to pursue an undergraduate degree in Arts or Social Sciences. The current foundation course provides an alternative pathway to young adults who have been in attendance at a Trinity Access Programme (TAP) school, who are eligible for a Local Authority Grant and who have achieved a minimum educational standard at the Leaving Certificate. On completion, students may be awarded a certificate that in turn may qualify them for entry to a degree programme. Similar to the other programmes, it offers direct financial support and mentoring. In addition to these offerings from Irish universities, many of the country's institutes of technology offer access programmes or pre-entry initiatives where, similar to the Trinity TAP programme, they work with designated local schools to encourage and enable students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to obtain a third-level qualification.

It should be noted that there is a small number (>10) of private, independent and not-for-profit colleges in Ireland offering degrees and Masters programmes ([educationinireland.com](http://educationinireland.com) 2018). Except for the National College of Ireland, where the SpringBoard + initiative is

supported (National College of Ireland, 2019), there is no evidence of any access or widening participation programmes in any of these institutions.

## **2.20. HEAR Scheme**

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) introduced the Targeted Initiatives Scheme in 1996 and arising from this, The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) Scheme was established. The scheme was innovative in that it was a national, co-ordinated scheme offering an alternative entry route to third-level education and allowing for both direct entry and points remission for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to any participating HEI. The focus of these increased access initiatives was to tackle a broad range of recognised social, educational and financial barriers to participation, with a particular focus on the easing of financial and educational constraints (O'Reilly, 2008). The HEAR scheme targets disadvantaged students using set criteria. In particular, there is a focus on those with no previous history of progression to higher-level education in their family. Also eligible are students where the family income is below a certain level (currently set at €46,000), students at designated disadvantaged schools and students who are members of the six under-represented groups outlined by Clancy (2001).

Following the publication of an evaluation of the schemes in 2013 (Byrne *et al.*, 2013), there were significant changes in the operation of HEAR and DARE. This evaluation provided the backdrop for the 2017 research, which resulted in the publication of the DARE HEAR Facts and Figures Report (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

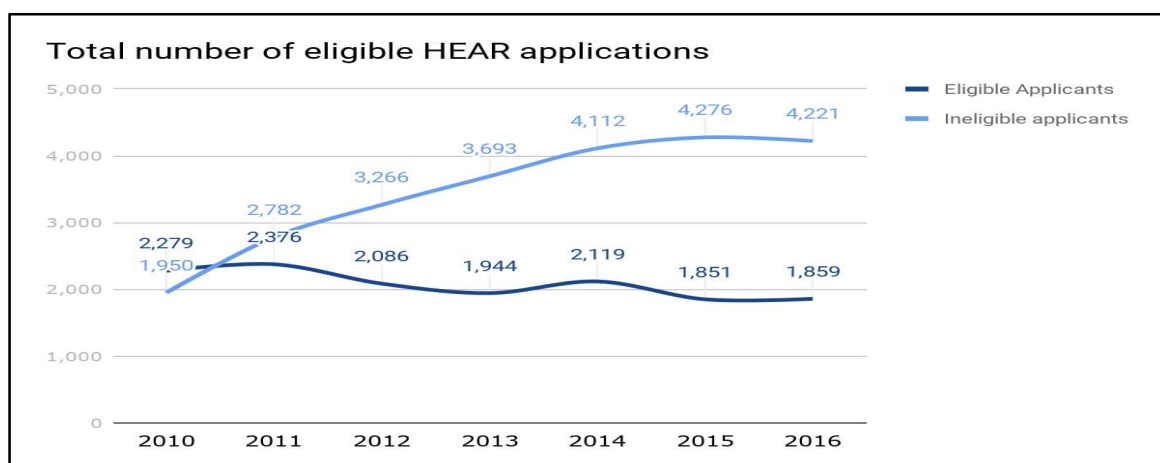


Figure 2.5: Total number of eligible HEAR applications 2010-2016. Source: DARE HEAR Facts and figures report 2017-2018.

Since 2010, as can be seen from figure 2.5, the number of applicants who make an application, navigate the process successfully and are deemed eligible has increased encouragingly. Nevertheless, a cohort begins the application process but does not complete it. This represents a worrying trend, and it is necessary to explore this phenomenon to understand it fully and to ensure all applicants can make a complete application.

## 2.21. Post-entry supports

Definitions of access emphasis, not just access to HE, but equally focus on retention and performance (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000; Fleming and Gallagher, 2003; Devlin and McKay, 2011). Adequate and targeted post-entry supports are therefore critical if students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are to truly benefit from the opportunities presented by their entry into HE. The supports aim to bridge the gap between what is required and the family circumstances from which the students emerge. Such supports generally fall into three categories: financial, personal and social, and academic (Murphy *et al.*, 2013). Such supports were first mooted in the mid-1990 and were suggested as first-year ‘care programmes’ (Department of Education and Science, 1995). Currently, these college supports may include orientation programmes to introduce students to university or college; extra tuition if required; study skills and exam preparation; one-to-one meetings with student

advisers; social gatherings; mentoring and when available additional financial assistance. These supports also typically provide advice regarding grants and scholarships.

## **2.22. Current Landscape**

Education policy in Ireland places higher education at the centre of future economic growth and the National Skills Strategy to 2025 aims to deliver more flexible, innovative and interdisciplinary skills to underpin Ireland's economic and societal growth over the coming years (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a). All groups in Irish society have experienced increased levels of participation in higher education and increased levels of educational attainment – including students with a disability, students experiencing social disadvantage and mature students. Yet, only 24% of students, half the national average, who completed the second year of senior cycle in designated disadvantaged schools (DEIS) go on to HE (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b). This participation rate is below the Higher Education Authority's targets, and all of these groups remain under-represented. It appears that widening access for the most disadvantaged groups of non-traditional students, such as working-class young people and young travellers, has met with very uneven results (Higher Education Authority, 2014).

Therefore, although the admission rates for those from lower social classes has improved in recent times, it is still low relative to higher social classes, and the scenario is considerably more nuanced and complex than the figures suggest. The free fees scheme, introduced in 1996, was considered a critical step towards achieving equity of access. Despite this initiative, research indicates that social inequality in higher education participation continues to persist in Ireland (Denny, 2015). Furthermore, the persistent socioeconomic disparity in participation rates means that the free fees system has resulted in a situation in which lower-income households are effectively subsidising the education of higher-income individuals (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). In effect, increased participation rates mask the broader issue of inequality, which continues to persist.

The literature has also identified another, more complex dimension to the debate, namely that inequality extends to the nature of HE accessed (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017). This scenario is also observable in the United Kingdom (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). So-called ‘schools league tables’, published annually in national newspapers, allow the third-level progression rates of every second-level school in Ireland to be publicly identified, pored over, analysed and in turn commented upon by the general and educational media. One of the most immediate and apparent observations is that elite social class participation has reached the point of “saturation” (Finnegan, Fleming and Loxley, 2017, p.126). Equally noteworthy, every year, is the high number of students from private and elite fee-paying schools who attend university, with their focus on honours degrees, rather than institutes of technology, which typically offer lower-level programmes. The greater progression rate of past students of fee-paying schools has created a situation where, although overall numbers going to college are rising, specific segments of the population almost exclusively attend university. Here they have access to courses leading to careers in elite, prestigious professions such as medicine and law, allowing for the reproduction of the social inequalities already prevalent in society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000). Graduation from these institutions and courses, in turn, yields higher economic, social and cultural capital (Martin, 2009; McCoy and Byrne 2011; Fleming, 2017).

This scenario requires a renewed focus; firstly, the need to identify the absolute participation rates of different social classes and secondly, and arguably more critically, scrutiny of which social groups dominate the most prestigious institutions and courses. In essence, it means, “finding terms of reference beyond the numbers game” (Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017, p.128).

### **2.23. Towards 2030**

The pursuit of equality has been a mainstream concern of Irish education policy since the 1965 Investment in Education report (Taighde ar Oideachas, 1965) and it continues to be motivated by the desire to achieve equity and efficiency in higher education provision. It does so by focusing on increasing participation and promoting equity of access. Education

acts as a buffer against poverty and this is highlighted by the fact that half of the households in Ireland that were income poor had a parent with no formal education qualifications (Russell, Maitre and Nolan, 2010). Consequently, any inequalities in progression to higher education may have implications for income inequality in Ireland. Moreover, in addition to this, the private benefits of higher education through higher lifecycle incomes will accrue to those with already high salaries, while low-income individuals are less likely to experience such gains. It is clear, therefore, that the claim that educational disadvantage is considered a factor which perpetuates intergenerational poverty (Higher Education Authority, 2015) is valid.

The most significant barrier to access continues to be financial. A substantial body of research indicates that individuals from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and communities are more likely to underachieve in the education system than their peers from higher-income backgrounds. The literature highlights a clear and strong relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes. This relationship is found across all major indicators of educational disadvantage leading McCoy *et al.* (2010) to suggest that grants are essential for higher education participation for those from lower social classes.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2015) was published in December 2015, and following its launch, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) established the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Fund. In Budget 2017, the Government committed €6 million to the PATH fund (Department of Education and Skills, 2017b).

Almost 50% of this will allow for the reintroduction of maintenance grants for the most disadvantaged students to progress to postgraduate study in the 2017/18 academic year under the student grants scheme. The reintroduction of these grants was a welcome development as it facilitates progression beyond an undergraduate degree, allowing underrepresented groups to keep pace with those who can afford to fund postgraduate study. Almost one-third of those who graduated in 2017 did so with a postgraduate qualification (Higher Education

Authority 2018a), and funds must be made available to allow underrepresented groups to progress beyond a primary degree. International and national research shows higher levels of education increase employability as well as salary levels (Lindley and Machin, 2011, Maslen, 2014, 2019) and as the demand for postgraduate qualifications increases, without proper support, low SES students will lag and lose the primary advantage they gained by obtaining a degree.

Research indicates that students who enter primary teaching courses are more likely to be socially advantaged than those on other higher education courses are (Keane and Heinz, 2015). They are also less likely to have attended a disadvantaged school, to receive a higher education grant, to be non-Irish or to have entered through an alternative route. Keane and Heinz (2015) reported that there is a feeling among students from disadvantaged backgrounds that teaching 'is not for them' (McMahon, 2017). The Government's aspiration is that increased, targeted PATH funding will develop pathways to teaching for those from underrepresented groups. Students from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, students with a disability and members of the Traveller community will receive support to become teachers and, in turn, become role models for others to follow.

Strand 2 of the PATH initiative is the "1916 bursaries" fund (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c) which is designated for students identified as the most socio-economically disadvantaged and specifically targeted at those who enter HE through non-traditional paths. Lone parents and ethnic minorities will also be a target group for this fund. Of significance, these bursaries, which are worth €5,000 per annum, are awarded in addition to any other grants and students will be entitled to hold the 1916 Bursary and the student grant simultaneously, where they meet the eligibility conditions of the student grant scheme.

PATH 3 refers to the Higher Education Access Fund, which is intended to support regional clusters of higher education institutions to attract 2,000 additional students from groups currently under-represented in higher education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c).

Finally, the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) will have an additional allocation of €3m over the next three years, and this is ring-fenced to enable participation in higher education on a part-time basis for lone parents and other target groups. SAF is available to support students whose participation in higher education would otherwise be at risk as a direct result of financial difficulties (Department of Education and Skills, 2017c).

## **2.24. The “Thinking Tools” of Bourdieu**

This section introduces Pierre Bourdieu and his writings as they relate to this study. Bourdieu (1920-2002) was a French social theorist whose “output was prolific and wide-ranging” (James, 2011, p. 1). He addressed topics and themes related to humans and the society in which they exist (Grenfell *et al.*, 1998). His output covers fields such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy, gender studies, psychoanalysis and education. His writings have been translated from his native French tongue into two dozen languages and continue to influence all disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Although his work is not always an easy read with its complex language, whether in French or its English translation (James, 2011) it can, as Jenkins (2002, p.11) suggests, “be enormously good to think with” as it “invites, even demands, argument and reflection”. The concepts of habitus, capital and field, which he devised, were an attempt to make sense of the relationship between social structures and everyday practices (Maton, 2008; James, 2011; Webb *et al.*, 2017). These concepts - his “thinking tools” provide the researcher with a usable theory of practice (Grenfell *et al.*, 1998; Murphy and Costa, 2015) and attempt to bridge the divide between theory and practice.

Capital, field and habitus are regarded as forming the “conceptual cornerstones” of Bourdieu’s theories (Bennett and Silva, 2011, p. 429). These concepts are not separate or individual but rather are interconnected. Grenfell explains:

It is important to stress that these should not be seen as independent entities; rather they are all interconnected, making up the structure and conditions of the social contexts Bourdieu studied (Grenfell, 2008, p.2).

Each of these concepts will now be examined.



### 2.24.1. Habitus

Bourdieu (1977) defined habitus as:

the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle (Bourdieu 1977, p.78).

Webb *et al.* (2017) paraphrase his definition to mean that habitus is those durable and transposable values and outlooks gained from cultural history, which remain regardless of environment and context. Maton (2008), in a somewhat colloquial expression, proposes that the term “does a lot of work” for Bourdieu, transcending deep-seated opposing methods of the world, as well as providing as a means of analysing the social through empirical research. Capturing the essence of the difficulty in defining the concept, he suggests that it can be “both revelatory and mystifying, instantly recognisable and difficult to define, straightforward and slippery” (Maton, 2008, p.1).

Habitus is the medium that encourages us to think relationally to transcend dichotomies to understand and explain the individual and society (Bourdieu, 1990).

Simply put, habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being (Maton, 2008). He elaborates:

Habitus is the link not only between past present and future but also between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, and structure and agency (Maton, 2008, p.53).

Mills and Gale (2007) suggested that Bourdieu uses the term habitus to mean

recurring patterns of class outlook - the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners – which are inculcated by habitus in terms of everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school (Mills and Gale, 2007, p.436).

Habitus embodies personal preferences and history in the context of the social sphere within which an individual operates. Therefore, education, social class, family influences and previous behaviour all influence that behaviour. Habitus refers to how the culture of a particular social group is embodied (internalised) in the individual, during the socialisation process, which begins in early childhood (Bourdieu, 1990). This internalised culture or habitus is, Bourdieu proposes, transposable, that is transferable (rather like 'transferable skills'), operating across a variety of settings - educational, economic, political, social, artistic and religious. For Bourdieu habitus operated below the level of consciousness and language and therefore was outside the control ('the will') of the individual. It is because of the inherent nature of habitus that its significance often goes unrecognised in people's realities.

In conclusion, it can be proffered that habitus organises individuals to engage in certain ways, guiding their actions and tendencies, but not to determine those actions. Habitus is not a discrete entity but works in tandem with field and capital, and these concepts are discussed in the following sections.

#### **2.24.2. Field**

The term field, as Bourdieu intended it, refers to the formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity. He uses the examples of family, school, higher education, art, politics and economics. While fields are viewed as being semi-autonomous, they often share similarities (homologies) in terms of defining social patterns and practices. A person's position within any field derives from the interrelation of their habitus and the capital they can mobilise in that field. Fields are structured by the two competing principles of social hierarchy: the distribution of economic capital and the distribution of cultural capital and all fall within the overarching field of social space.

A field is a field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field,

these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field. (Bourdieu 1993, p.39).

Jenkins (2002) states:

A field, in Bourdieu's sense, is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them (Jenkins, 2002, p.84).

A field is viewed in terms of the social actor's habitus and the capital they have at their disposal. Thompson (2008) explains:

Bourdieu argued for a methodology that would bring together an inter-dependent and co-constructed trio -field, capital and habitus - with none of them primary, dominant or causal (Thompson, 2008, p. 69).

The concepts of economic, cultural and social capital are considered vital to the position of the social agents within the field, and in recognition of this, these concepts will now be discussed.

### **2.24.3. Economic capital**

Economic capital is economic wealth and is expressed largely in symbolic terms as money and assets with monetary expression. Uniquely, it can be cashed in any part of society. Broadening the notion of capital from the commonly held assumption of it being entirely economic, Bourdieu considered the concept of capital beyond this and introduced two other forms of capital: Social and cultural. In this wider system of exchanges, diverse assets are traded within various fields (Moore, 2008). Bourdieu (1986, p.241) critiques economic theory, claiming that it ignored the significance of other non-economic forms of exchange by "reducing the universe of exchanges" to the purely economic thereby implicitly defining other forms of exchange as non-economic and therefore disinterested.

The world of bourgeois man, with his double-entry accounting, cannot be invented without producing the pure, perfect universe of the artist and the intellectual and the gratuitous activities of art-for-art's sake and pure theory (Bourdieu, 1986. p.241).

He claims that the social world cannot be fully and comprehensively understood unless capital other than economic is considered.

It is, in fact, impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognised by economic theory (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241).

The discussion will now proceed to examine in more detail the two other forms of capital which Bourdieu introduced.

#### **2.24.4. Cultural capital**

Cultural capital refers mainly to the products of education, whether these are visible in individuals such as accent, vocabulary and bearing, connected to objects like qualifications or books, or connected to institutions like schools, universities and libraries. Bourdieu also refers to cultural, which is the product of education as an academic market (Grenfell *et al.*, 1998). As capital attracts capital and they are in direct proportion, the more economic capital an individual possesses, the more likely it is for their children to obtain more cultural capital.

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e. the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243).

#### **2.24.5. Social Capital**

The third concept of capital, which Bourdieu introduces, is social capital, used to signify a network of social relations or a sphere of contacts for a group or an individual. Significantly, he describes the networks as durable suggesting that social capital is not transient or fragile, but rather gained and maintained over time, travel and activities.

Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119).

Bourdieu uses social capital to explain the cold realities of social inequality (Gauntlett, 2011) by examining how those at the pinnacle of social hierarchies hold onto their position. Others see the value of social capital in all kinds of communities, including the powerless and marginalised and consider them a key component in building and maintaining democracy (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). Despite any differences in perception, personal connections, interpersonal interactions and a shared set of values are considered crucial (Field, 2003).

#### **2.25. Higher Education and capital**

When considering the field of higher education, which is the site of this study, all species of capital are at play. The impact of economic capital is evident, as is the impact of cultural capital that students may possess due to their parents' appreciation of the value of higher education. Social capital encompasses the resources that are available to students through their social networks and relationships, and that may, in turn, prove beneficial. Families, too, are often considered a source of social capital (Edwards, 2004). Social capital may accrue through social processes between the family and wider society resulting in many advantageous networks for those students participating in higher education (Reay, 2000).

All forms of capital are interdependent and ultimately rooted in economic capital. Bourdieu acknowledges that:

It has to be posited simultaneously that economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital and that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessors) that economic capital is at their root (Bourdieu, 1986, p.54).

#### **2.25.1. “Fish in water”**

Bourdieu introduced the phrase “fish in water” when discussing the concepts of habitus and field and explained how a middle-class, or more advantaged student, seamlessly makes the transition from school to university. For the more advantaged, going to university is a normative choice and a rite of passage; something that has always been expected and it is what their families do. It is an essential element and part of the natural trajectory of their lives (Reay, 2009; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). The transition is seamless because they are entering a familiar habitus of which they are the product and “like a fish in water: [it] does not feel the weight of the water and [it] takes the world for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992. p.127).

#### **2.26. Challenges to and critiques of Bourdieu**

No review of the vast scholarship of Bourdieu can ignore the challenges to and critiques of his writings. At a very basic level, the task of interpreting the translated texts and reading the complex wide-ranging work of Bourdieu with its contradictions, gaps and unresolved questions, is challenging (Wacquant, 1992; Rhynas, 2005) and his abstract language may leave one feeling “bewildered” (Maton, 2008). Bourdieu was disinclined to simplify his work due to a fear of undermining the complex meanings of his writings, claiming that complex language is necessary to reflect a complex reality. Nevertheless, there is a sense that some of this complexity aims to protect his intellectual field rather than explaining the social field itself.

Grenfell *et al.* (1998, p.2), while not insisting that a Bourdieuan approach is the best way to research educational phenomena, propose that research in terms of “Bourdieu’s theory of practice offers insights and understandings not readily visible to other approaches”. Tooley and Darby (1998) present an alternative stance in their critique of Reay’s (1995) study of habitus in the classroom. They contend that the “concept is so slippery as to be useless” (p.59) and that her study was an example of a case of flawed studies due to her uncritical admiration of the work of Bourdieu. Nash (1999) rejects this charge claiming that it is unsubstantiated and that Reay was involved in ethnographic research, and that her observations provide a summary review of Bourdieu’s concepts. Reay displays an almost evangelical stance in her praise for the value of the application of Bourdieu’s concepts to educational research, particularly research concerned with access to higher education. Murphy and Costa (2016, p.4) use a warlike description of Reay’s admiration, describing it as a “call to arms” when she entreats researchers to expand the concepts of habitus and improve it through engagement with real life (Reay, 2004).

Critics of habitus (Tooley and Darby, 1998; Goldthorpe 2007) focus on its determinism and its failure to explain anomalies. In particular, they cite the anomaly of how certain working-class individuals have been able to achieve within the education system and have become upwardly mobile. This criticism is ironic, given Bourdieu’s rationale for developing the concept and he argues that habitus is central to his methodology of structuralist constructivism and attempts to transcend dualisms of agency-structure, objective-subjective and to fill the vacuum which inhabits the centre of sociology. Jenkins (2002) contends that although Bourdieu attempts to transcend the divide between “objectivism” and “subjectivism”, there remains an unresolved contradiction between determinism and voluntarism and his ideology. He further claims that habitus remains essentially deterministic and circular and is an unyielding concept.

Reay (2004) challenges the criticisms of the deterministic nature of habitus, arguing:

While habitus reflects the social position in which it was constructed,  
it also carries within it the genesis of new creative responses that

are capable of transcending the social conditions in which it was produced (Reay, 2004, pp.434-435).

A full review of Bourdieu's vast scholarship is beyond the scope of this inquiry, and of necessity, the focus has been on his conceptual tools and more specifically their application to the study of higher education and its role in social reproduction. The review involved consulting not only traditional texts but also a diverse range of books, journals, newspaper articles and social media (Thomson and Walker, 2010). Bourdieu continues to be relevant, and his concepts extend beyond the purely academic realm with a new generation of Bourdieu scholars engaging with his concepts via social media, using Twitter and Facebook to maintain ongoing discourse (Stahl, 2016).

## **2.27. Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to highlight the landscape in which low socioeconomic students engage with extracurricular activities. It, therefore, considered the literature concerned with student engagement outside the classroom and the benefits which accrue. It introduced the Uaneen module and presented the case for such an accredited, reflective module in the broad curriculum of higher education. It proceeded to focus on the development of access programmes and related initiatives designed to tackle the unequal participation of specific sectors of the Irish population in Higher Education. Cognisant of the fact that the widening participation agenda has more than one target group, it has nonetheless focused on one sector and is concerned with students from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background. It highlighted the more targeted recent Government funding developments. It also examined the historical impact of university and national access programmes, including the HEAR scheme, and considered the extent to which they have been successful at achieving their stated aims and objectives. Finally, this chapter introduced the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and those elements of his writings which are of particular relevance to this study. A more detailed account of the application of his concepts follows in chapter three.



## **Chapter 3    Methodology**

### **3.1.        Introduction**

The opening paragraphs of this chapter continue the thread of Bourdieu and concentrate on how his concepts are applied in the study. A discussion on the ontological and epistemological considerations pertinent to the research design and execution follows. It continues with an overview of the chosen research design, along with a rationale for the qualitative research methods employed. It then provides a detailed summary of the procedure for data collection and analysis and a consideration of the ethical procedure applied to the research process. The chapter concludes with a summation of the components of the research design and an introduction to the findings.

### **3.2.        Applying Bourdieu**

In the preceding chapter, the concepts of Bourdieu were introduced and the rationale for utilising his concepts in this study will now be presented. His works on education focus on the role that secondary and tertiary education play in reproducing social and cultural classification and stratification. They would, therefore, appear to offer a relevant lens through which to conduct this inquiry which seeks to explore how sustained engagement with extracurricular activities affect access students' experience of university. There is a sense, almost instinctively, on the part of the researcher that this approach will *feel right* (emphasis added), given the educational journey travelled. Stahl (2016) states:

(Bourdieu) resonates intensely with people who have moved through fields and experienced class practices in full operation (Stahl, 2016, p.1).

This inquiry will use Bourdieu's "organising concepts" (Reay, 1998 p. 59), or unique set of conceptual terms (Grenfell, 2008) of capital, field and habitus to examine how social structures and human activity interact in the sphere of extracurricular activities in higher education. Capital, field and habitus are regarded as forming the "conceptual cornerstones" of Bourdieu's theories (Bennett and Silva, 2011, p. 429) and similar to Reay's (2000) study

the concepts of capital, habitus and field will be utilised more as a heuristic device than as an overarching conceptual framework.

Habitus, capital and field may be considered “both an object and a means of investigation” (Murphy and Costa, 2016, p.4) and being malleable they are “receptive to multiple and original applications” (Murphy and Costa, 2016, p.4). For the researcher, Bourdieu’s tools offer a workable, practical and usable mechanism for exploring and understanding students’ experience of extracurricular activities in higher education. The phrase “tools in a toolbox” offers a hint of their practicality and versatility. Tangible, practical and resourceful, tools are designed to be grasped and applied to a task to hone a finished, improved and refined product.

Fields are organised around specific forms of capital or combinations of capitals, which “are both the process within, and products, of a field” (Thompson, 2008, p.69). They are relational in nature and are characterised by their particular regulative principles – the “rules of the game” or “logic of practice”. Fields exist at various levels and overlap, with smaller fields, for example in this study, extracurricular activity, nested in larger fields such as a university. As each field is considered to possess its own forces and structures (Mahar, Harker and Wilkes, 1990), the concept will facilitate the exploration of the necessary forces and structures, in the identified field of higher education, to promote the engagement of low SES students within its environs.

Habitus is a significant tool within this inquiry as it allows for the examination of the link between past, present and future, structure and agency and the social and the individual (Maton, 2008). The concept, therefore, may help to explore the students’ motivation to engage with their particular programme of study and with the extracurricular agenda in university. Despite counterclaims, it can be viewed as dynamic becoming operational within a given field and allowing for different practices and positions and social experiences (Bourdieu, 1993). The concept is considered multi-layered and consists not only of an individual’s history but also the collective history of family and class (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Hence, it offers the potential to explore the experience of the individuals in the study

as they navigate a journey, which involved a transition from their familial habitus into the unfamiliar habitus of higher education and their sustained engagement with a variety of extracurricular activities within that habitus.

Capital, of the cultural, social and economic variety occupies a pivotal space in Bourdieu's tools box and when considering the field of higher education, which is the site of this study, all species of capital are at play. Given the importance, Bourdieu attaches to these relational concepts in educational success or lack thereof they will be valuable concepts to engage with in a study involving low SES individuals and their experience of higher education. They will particularly useful tools to address the question focusing on the capital created through engagement in extracurricular activities and to explore how a positive culture may be fostered to facilitate such engagement.

Throughout the narrative, the concepts of habitus, field and capital will be employed relationally to highlight and facilitate a deeper understanding of the motivations and experiences of the individuals within this inquiry. It will seek to explore what motivates the initial and continued engagement with DCU's programmes of study. Mindful of the centrality of reflectivity in a Bourdieusian approach the intention is to maintain a reflective stance throughout the process and a more detailed discussion on how this was achieved is included later in the chapter.

### **3.3. Paradigms**

The design of any research study begins with the selection of a topic and a paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105) call a paradigm "a basic system or worldview that guides the investigator". Kuhn (1962) first used the term to denote a conceptual framework shared by a community of scientists, which provided them with a convenient model for examining problems and finding solutions. A paradigm is, essentially, the worldview, the beliefs and the values of the researcher and it is within this world that they operate. Ontological and epistemological assumptions inform a paradigm about the nature of social reality (Patton, 2002).

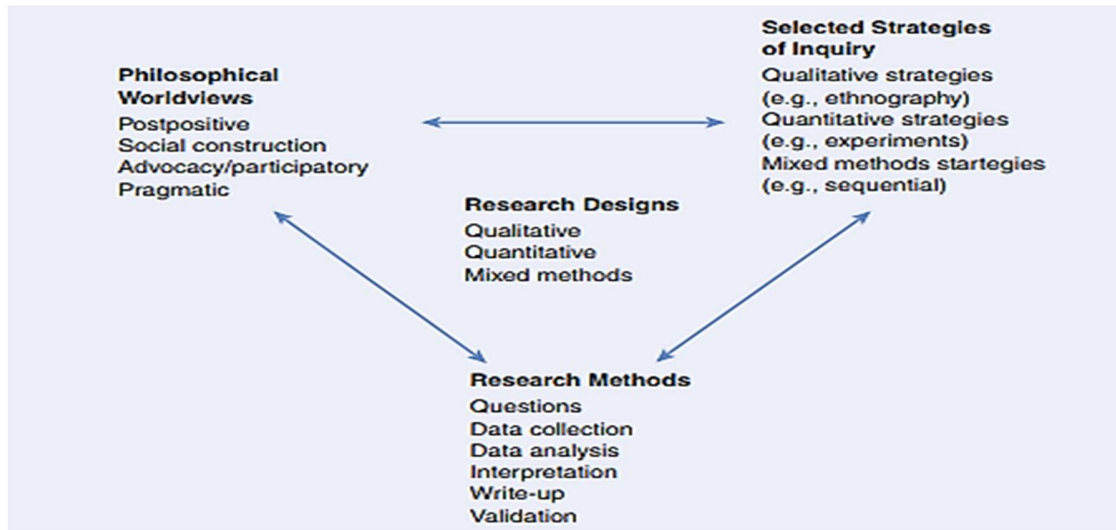
Ontology deals with questions about what things exist or can be said to exist. The ontological stance of a positivist paradigm is realist, which assumes that reality exists and that this reality is driven by immutable natural laws and mechanisms (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The ontology of interpretive paradigms is relativist and interpretivists do not believe that reality is “out there”, rather they consider it to be socially constructed with individuals making sense of social realities which emerge when consciousness interacts with objects (Crotty, 1998). Epistemology pertains to the nature of knowledge (Crotty, 2003) and belief. The epistemology of the positivist paradigm is dualist and objectivist. On the contrary, interpretivism espouses a subjective and transactional epistemology.

The ontological and epistemological duality of the approaches affects the nature of inquiry. Positivist researchers perceive the world as an external and objective reality where observers are independent and detached (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2007). Objectivism and its attendant epistemologies underpin the positivist stance that dominated social research in the early twentieth century (Crotty, 1998) and are associated with realist ontologies, which view reality as an external objective phenomenon, existing independently of human consciousness (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Alternatively, post-positivist perspectives consider that knowledge is constructed through various interactions in research processes with co-participants. Knowledge, according to this perspective, is considered personal, subjective and unique. Stake (1995) declares that in terms of constructivist knowledge work, “most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (p.99). Consequently, researchers strive to explore individuals’ perceptions, share their meanings and develop insights about the case under observation. (Grix, 2002; Bryman, 2008).

Furlong and Marsh describe ontology and epistemology (2002, p. 17) as being like “a skin, not a sweater” which cannot “be taken on and off”. Doctoral students are, nonetheless, required to demonstrate what Thomson and Walker (2010, p.27) describe as “epistemological agility” as “epistemology bears mightily on the way we go about our research” (Crotty 1998, p. 9). The contrasting epistemological views of reality - positivism and interpretivism - give

rise in turn to contrasting approaches to research and the preferred approach or methodology in turn eventually determines instrumentation and data collection methods (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Having an epistemological perspective is important for several reasons (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008). First, it can help to clarify issues of research design, including the kind of evidence to gather, from where/whom, and how it will be interpreted. Secondly, a knowledge of research philosophy will help the researcher to recognise which designs will work optimally for their particular set of objectives and which will not.

Consequently, researchers must be in a position to make explicit, describe, and if necessary, defend, their ontological and epistemological positions (Furlong and Marsh, 2002; Grix, 2002; Darlaston-Jones 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that a combination of personal belief, researcher's experience and an understanding of their philosophical perspectives underpins the formulation of strategy and selection of a methodology for a study. Ravitch and Riggan (2017, p.194) speak of a conceptual framework, which "incorporates personal interests and goals, identity and positionality". Additionally, they claim that it includes "intellectual curiosity, personal and professional biographies and histories" as well as "socio-political and institutional locations and positionalities" (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p.195). Justification of methodology reaches into the researchers' assumptions about reality, what is human knowledge, and what knowledge will be generated by their research. In summary, a researcher's methodological approach, underpinned by and reflecting specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, represents a choice of approach and research methods adopted in a given study. It is the bridge that unites a philosophical viewpoint and a method (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Figure 3.1 (below) depicts how worldviews, strategies and research methods are interconnected.



*Figure 3.1: A Framework for Design—the Interconnection of Worldviews, Strategies of Inquiry, and Research Methods (Creswell, 2007, p.5)*

Researchers should investigate various research approaches and paradigms to guard against “method-led” research (Grix, 2002, p.179) and avoid choosing a research approach that might not be suitable for the particular context (Biesta, 2007). The research method must fit the problem under scrutiny in the study (Crotty, 1998; Robson, 2002) rather than being overtly biased by a particular theoretical stance (Grix, 2002). Patton (2002, p.39) argues, “specific study design and methods decisions are best made within an overall strategic framework” and cautions against becoming overly concerned with becoming expert in a particular theoretical area to conduct quality research. He claims “... one can learn to be a good interviewer or observer, and learn to make sense of the resulting data, without first engaging in deep epistemological reflection and philosophical study” (p.69). Table 3.1 below highlights the practical implications for research practice based on a researcher’s philosophical assumptions.

Table 3.1

Philosophical Assumptions with Implications for Practice			
Assumption	Question	Characteristics	Implications for Practice
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	The participants in the case offer multiple realities that are both subjective and complex.	The researcher uses the words of participants from documents and interviews to provide evidence of their different perspectives
Epistemological	What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?	The researcher is considered a co-participant in the study and is the coordinator of the Module the participants undertook while in university.	The researcher is accepted and trusted by participants, based on a prior relationship
Axiological	What is the role of values?	The researcher acknowledges that research is value-laden and that biases are present.	Researcher openly discusses the values and personal approaches that shape the narrative. Both the researcher and the co-participants influence approaches to data collection and analysis
Rhetorical	What is the language of the research?	A literary and traditional academic style using the passive voice, with qualitative terms but with limited specialised terminology or definitions is used throughout.	The researcher attempts to combine an elaborate code from research reports and from published materials with the first person vernacular of co-participants' evidence to form an engaging narrative.
Methodological	What is the process of the research?	The researcher utilises a case study methodology to study the topic within its context and to present an emergent narrative for readership consideration.	The researcher utilises a body of established information, designs open-ended data-gathering opportunities for new knowledge work, concentrates on particulars rather than generalisations, and allows for on-going revisions by participants.

Source: Adapted from Creswell's Philosophical Assumptions with Implications for Practice (Creswell, 2007, p.17)

### **3.4. Research Design**

Creswell (2013) suggests that individuals preparing a research proposal or plan make explicit the larger philosophical ideas they espouse. A well thought out and consistent set of philosophical assumptions will constitute a credible research philosophy, which underpins methodological choice, research strategy, data collection techniques and analysis procedures. As previously discussed, distinct paradigms are traditionally associated with distinct investigative approaches, thereby making explicit a philosophical stance provides a rationale for the selection of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. The researcher in this study has a background in social science and is currently module co-ordinator for the Uaneen module, which is a self-crafted, self-directed module with an essential reflection component. All the participants in the study have graduated from this module, and the research aims to explore their experience of navigating their degree, combining academic and non-academic pursuits. Additionally, it will explore the creation of social and cultural capital facilitated by these pursuits, attempting to capture multiple meanings, interpretations and realities. The research will attempt to make sense of their experience by inquiring into participants' activities, thoughts and feelings. Creating individual accounts of their experience of engagement in extracurricular activities will allow for multiple perspectives of the phenomena to be exposed. Consequently, the theoretical perspective, which governs this research, has been positioned towards an interpretivist stance.

In general, interpretivists emphasise the importance of language, culture and history (Crotty, 1998) in the shaping of our interpretations and experiences of organisational and social worlds. Description and, in particular, thick description (Geertz, 1973) rather than experimentation is important. This approach fits comfortably with the epistemological conviction of the researcher who believes that meaning is not discovered but constructed, consequently "there [can be] no meaning without a mind" (Crotty, 2003, p.9).



### **3.5. Using Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative research shares many of the assumptions of an interpretivist paradigm, and so researchers adopting this approach tend to employ qualitative methods. Consequently, for this study, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate, as it is exploratory and interpretative with personal interpretation forming a core aspect of the data analysis process. Miles and Huberman (1994) claim that qualitative research generates knowledge of naturally occurring and ordinary events that take place in real-life settings. Preissle (2006, p.686) defines qualitative research as “a loosely defined category of conceptually informed research designs or models, all of which elicit verbal, visual, tactile, olfactory or gustatory information in the form of descriptive narratives like field notes, recordings or other transcriptions from audio- and videotapes, and other written records and pictures or films”.

Once a topic of much debate and discussion, the debate between qualitative and quantitative inquiry has “mellowed” in recent years (Patton, 2015, p.731). Critics of qualitative research view it as being too subjective and susceptible to generalisation and having a lack of transparency (Bryman, 2016). Its credibility concerning reliability and validity is also questioned, and some view it as no more than a support to the more reliable quantitative methods (Silverman, 2010). Creswell (2009, p.9), however, counters such criticism and identifies qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”. He continues to describe how qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, with participants who are actively involved in the data collection. To ensure that the process is emergent rather than prefigured a rapport must be built and credibility established between the researcher and the participants. He summarises by indicating that those “who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (Creswell, 2009, p.4).

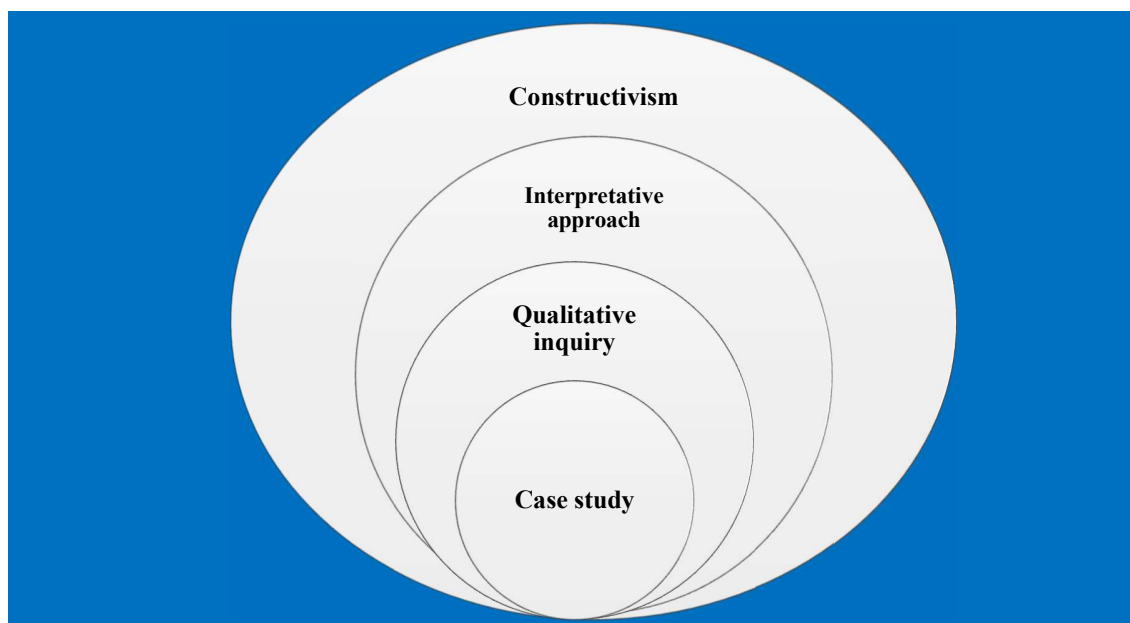
Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.13), similarly, suggest that qualitative inquiry is not about phenomena, which are experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. They state that “qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed

nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” and go on to highlight the value-laden nature of such inquiry.

Given the research topic, the small number of participants and the goal of in-depth inquiry into perspectives, beliefs and opinions, there were no obvious quantitative methods deemed appropriate in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify the types of studies which are of most value when using qualitative approaches and this inquiry fits into the area of research that elicits tacit knowledge and subjective understandings and interpretations. Data collection instruments such as surveys and questionnaires, traditionally associated with quantitative methods, would not serve the study well as the exploratory nature of this research requires face-to face-inquiry, with the potential to explore opinions and views in detail.

The literature is in agreement that qualitative research is a term that includes several research designs such as case study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology all characterised by specific design assumptions, sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis protocols. The use of qualitative case studies is a well-established approach in educational settings, and it became evident in preparation for this research process that the most appropriate research design was that of case study. It was selected because of the range of options it offers in terms of its ability to focus “on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se” (Stake, 1995, p. 3), and it further facilitated exploration of the core research question: How does sustained engagement with extracurricular activities impact on access students’ experience of University? and its sub-questions as follows:

- What motivates the initial and continued engagement of access students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with DCU programmes of study?
- What forms of capital are created through engagement in extracurricular activities, within and beyond DCU?
- What processes, practices and resources are needed to promote the creation of capital and other beneficial outcomes?



*Figure 3.2: Overview of the research design*

### **3.6. Case Study Research**

The interpretative paradigm, phenomenological approach, and constructivism as a basis of qualitative research are closely linked to the definition and characteristics of case study research. A case study is, therefore, more qualitative than quantitative, but not exclusively so, and it may be a combination of both elements. Nonetheless, case study research is most often described as qualitative inquiry (Stake, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2013). It is often considered a research design rather than a method (Buchanan, 2012), which allows for an exploration of a situation while taking a holistic view (Denscombe, 2010; Yin, 2014). Flexible in their design (Robson, 2002), case studies allow for an iterative reflective approach drawing on multiple forms of data collection which facilitates an investigation and understanding of issues in real-world settings. Case studies, according to Denscombe (2010, p.36), aim “to illuminate the general by looking at the particular”. Furthermore, they allow the researcher to “delve into things in more detail and discover things that might not have become apparent through more superficial research”. Yin’s (2014, p.xxii) explanation of case study research views it as a form of enquiry in a real-life context, rather than in a contrived experiment situation. Case study research, he contends,

is concerned with investigating contemporary (as opposed to historical) phenomenon while relying on multiple sources of converging data. It is, he proposes, a “linear but iterative process”.

Stake (1995, p.xi), similar to Denscombe, views case study as being interested in the particular and how that fits into a broader context. It is, he concludes, “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances “. Case study also allows for the capture of multiple perspectives, which are rooted in a specific setting leading to a detailed, holistic and contextualised understanding of the phenomenon (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). Such multiple perspectives are generated either from multiple data collection methods or from multiple accounts involving people with different perspectives of the topic under review. “Many voices” provide “many meanings” (Buchanan, 2012, p. 364), which suggests that individuals possess innately different understandings of phenomena.

A versatile approach, case study research [“it] may be aligned with any philosophical stance” (Morais, 2010). Stake (1995, 2006) pioneered the use of case study research with a constructivist orientation to develop ways of evaluating educational programmes, declaring that in terms of constructivist knowledge “most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p.99). Merriam (1998, 2009) similarly used case study research. Both approaches emphasise inductive orientation, discovery and holistic analysis, all presented in a thick descriptive account. Case study design is particularly suited to exploratory studies and to research that asks “how” and “why” questions (Robson, 2002; Yin, 2014). Creswell (2007) provides a comprehensive definition:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007, p.73).

### **3.7. Limitations of case study research**

Yin (2014, p.xix) refers to the fact that “case study research may be having an increasingly prominent place in everyone’s portfolio”. He arrives at this conclusion by surveying references to case study research citations in the thirty years between the publication of the first and fifth editions of his seminal work on case study research. Despite its apparent increased popularity and application, criticisms continue. The potential for researcher bias towards verification of their preconceived notions is one such criticism, but researchers self-disclosing their assumptions, beliefs, and biases offset this. Creswell and Miller (2000, p.127) suggest several options for incorporating this reflexivity into a narrative account. One of these, a separate section on the “role of the researcher,” is included later in this chapter.

Further criticism levelled at case study research questions its commitment to rigour, in terms of validity and reliability (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Bryman, 2016). So while it may be acceptable as a descriptive account of a situation, this acceptance does not extend to analyses or evaluation (Denscombe, 2010). Stake and Merriam, recognising the positivist undertones of concepts such as reliability and validity, claim “that it is almost impossible to apply the concepts of validity and reliability into qualitative inquiry” (Yazan, 2015, p.146). Yin (2017, p.18), on the other hand, provides a comprehensive road map for the researcher to ensure rigour and admonishes researchers who have “been sloppy” and who have “not followed systematic procedures” urging researchers to “avoid such practices”.

In common with most other qualitative research, case study research faces the challenges of generalisability. To illustrate the complexity of this challenge Lincoln and Guba (1985, quoted in Flick, 2014, p. 495) discuss this problem under the heading: “the only generalization is: there is no generalization”. Yet, they offer the solution of transferability of any findings from one context to another. Yin (2017) addresses the challenge head-on, and he identifies a similarity between case studies and scientific experiments in the ability to be

“generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (Yin, 2017, p.20).

Before settling on a case study approach, other methods were explored to ascertain their potential. A narrative approach, similar to that employed by Bruen (2014) in her study of the experience of a small number of mature students in a West of Ireland university, was considered. Creswell (2007) advocates using narrative research to capture the detailed stories or life experiences of a small number of individuals. So while initially, it may have appeared appropriate as this study focuses on the experience of the participants during their engagement with the Uaneen Module rather than a more protracted life exposure, it was set aside. An ethnographic study was briefly flirted with but was quickly rejected as it requires sustained involvement and engagement with an entire cultural group, their perspectives and their practices (Hammersley, 1992; Creswell, 2007) based primarily on observations and a prolonged period spent by the researcher in the field.

A phenomenological study describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (or topic or concept) for several individuals. In this type of qualitative study, the researcher reduces the experiences to a central meaning or the “essence” of the experience following the collection of data from those who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher, in turn, develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Although this type of approach was a feasible option, a relative lack of researcher experience in the area of phenomenological study, in particular with the practice of bracketing, prompted this approach to be discounted.

Ultimately, a case study approach was chosen because of the range of options it offers in terms of focus whether “on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se” (Stake, 1995, p. 3). Its pragmatism and flexibility were attractive to the researcher and it was selected over other methods as it allows for the in-depth study of phenomena in a fluid and iterative sense (Dowling and Brown, 2010). It is capable of providing a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of the inquiry topic and interpreting a

situation or processes such as attendance at university or engagement with extracurricular activities through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Consequently, it was felt that it would prove to be useful in narrating the participants “lived experiences” and capturing their thoughts and feelings in a specific context and situation. Rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources. Stake (1994, p. 237) refers to what he terms “intrinsic case study”, where the aim is to allow the “case to reveal its own story” and to capture the uniqueness and peculiarity of the phenomenon under consideration. The intrinsic case is often exploratory, and the researcher is guided by their interest in the case itself rather than in extending theory or generalising across cases. Such an approach appeared to fit with the desired outcomes of this small-scale study - namely to explore with the participants their own lived experience of engaging with extracurricular activities and the Uaneen module while undergraduate students on the DCU Access Programme. Their subsequent personal and professional journeys also form part of the exploration. The researcher's perceptions and interpretations become part of the research, and as a result, a subjective and interpretive orientation flows throughout the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). This subjectivity is acknowledged and managed. To achieve this, the researcher embraces a reflexive stance within the study and uses memoing and journaling to support this position (Stake, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014; Yin, 2014). One of the advantages and indeed the attractions of a case study approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants, which enables participants to freely and accurately relate their stories (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). This collaboration was evident in this study, as all the participants engaged enthusiastically and willingly shared their stories.

This approach selected provides the necessary framework to explore the topic, using multiple perspectives- nine in-depth interviews with graduates- while also utilising more than one data source, namely interviews and secondary data analysis of the assignments submitted as a requirement for the module. Informants, suggests Yin (2014, p.239), “provide critical information or interpretations about the case and [may] suggest other sources of evidence for the researcher to check”. The directors of two university Access Departments were key

informants in this study, and their thoughtful and insightful interview data served to further illuminate the topic.

### 3.8. Designing the case

Yin, Merriam and Stake are the three seminal authors who provide procedures to follow when conducting case study research (Yazan, 2015). In this inquiry, Yin's procedures will provide a roadmap for the researcher and a bounded exploratory single case design with multiple embedded units of analysis, as outlined by Yin, is the chosen design. Yin (2017, p.31) emphasises the importance of bounding the case as it helps "to determine the scope of [your] data collection and, in particular, how you will distinguish data about the subject of your case study (the "phenomenon") from data external to the case (the "context").

*Table 3.2: Designing the Case*

<b>Designing the case</b>	
<b>The subject or "phenomenon" under study</b>	The experience of low SES students' engagement with extracurricular activities in a university setting.
<b>The unit of analysis</b>	Nine graduates of DCU's Access Programme and Uaneen Module, with some input from directors of two University Access programmes Documentation
<b>Illustrative types of theories</b>	Societal Theories - theories of widening participation. Theories of civic engagement Individual Theories – theories of student engagement
<b>Single case study design</b>	Yin considers a case study design as an appropriate approach "to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday commonplace situation" (2009, p.48).
<b>The analysis of data</b>	Data analysis must be linked to the original propositions in the case in order to reflect the purpose of the initial study.



### **3.9. Purposive sampling strategy**

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) claim that the quality of a piece of research, as well as being determined by the appropriateness of the methodology and instrumentation, also relies on the suitability of the sampling strategy. Sample size is not straightforward in qualitative approaches and small samples can yield rich data sets. Unlike quantitative research, which looks to develop generalizable results of a population, qualitative case study pinpoints or purposively selects specific participants who can help illuminate the research (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993). Bryman (2008, p.458) observes, “most writers on sampling in qualitative research based on interviews recommend that purposive sampling is conducted”. Considered a key feature of qualitative research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.158), purposive sampling emphasises quality rather than quantity, and the objective is not to maximise numbers but to become “saturated” with information on the topic (Padgett, 1998, p. 52). It offers flexibility in terms of the justification of sampling choice, the number of investigated cases and sampling techniques. In addition, purposive sampling is considered to be particularly appropriate in case study research as it allows for the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002), from which the researcher can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose and investigated phenomena of the study. It may also serve to highlight different perspectives on a problem or issue (Creswell, 2007), facilitating the capture of multiple meanings, interpretations and realities. For the reasons outlined, a purposive sampling strategy was implemented in this study.

### **3.10. Sample selection**

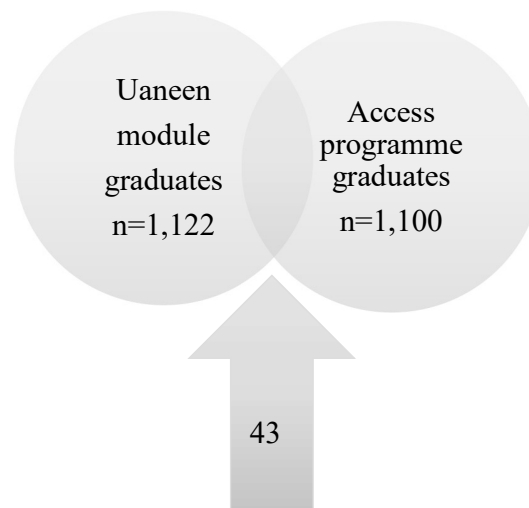
This study is concerned with exploring the experience of a small cohort of graduates from the DCU Access programme who engaged for a sustained period with extracurricular activities during their undergraduate years in DCU. Graduation from the Uaneen Module provides conclusive evidence of rich and meaningful engagement, so this was one of the criteria used to select the sample population. The other qualifying criteria were that the participant was designated an access student while an undergraduate student in DCU. This population, by virtue of their relationship with the research topic, was identified as being in a position to provide the most relevant, comprehensive and rich information.

Anecdotally, there was an awareness on the part of the researcher that over the years, access students had played an active role in what could be broadly termed “student life” in DCU. To illustrate, over a decade or so, several access students had held sabbatical positions in the Students’ Union. The researcher’s interest was piqued by this apparent phenomenon and decided to pursue it further. Remenyi *et al.* (1998) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) agree on the need to select a research area which matches the strengths and interests of the researcher. A researcher’s theories or hunches, developed through a systematic review of existing theory and research (Marshall and Rossman, 1999), provide legitimate inspiration for a study.

The researcher initially approached the head of the DCU Access department and some meetings were held to ascertain two elements; firstly, their interest in any such study and secondly, their ability and willingness to cooperate with the process. The staff in the Access Department was essentially the “gatekeepers” in this research, those individuals who play a key role in granting or denying access (Burgess, 1991, p.44). Although negotiations with gatekeepers are not always smooth and straightforward (Burgess, 1991; Patton 2002), in this instance, the response was extremely positive and enthusiastic. The Access Department was interested in pursuing the topic of access students’ engagement with extracurricular activities. They have a tradition of encouraging their students to take part in extracurricular activities, believing instinctively that such engagement enhances them professionally and personally. Despite this, there was no DCU specific research to substantiate this belief. Consequently, they welcomed any such research and perceived it to be of potential value to their practices.

The next step was to cross-reference graduates from the Uaneen module from 2001- 2015 with graduates from the Access programme over the same period. A list of graduates from the Uaneen programme, identified only by their unique student number, was supplied to the Access Department to allow them to cross-reference them with their graduates. Following the cross-referencing exercise, the Access Department confirmed that there were forty-three graduates common to both groups. This number was considered adequate to move to the next stage, which was to explore the willingness (or otherwise) of these graduates to agree

to be part of the study. Names or other identifiers were not revealed to the researcher to protect the identity of the forty-three graduates.



*Figure 3.3: Overlap of graduates 2001-2015*

Between the time of the initial agreement to cooperate with the study and the cross-referencing exercise, the Head of the Access department resigned her post. In her absence, a member of staff acts up in the role, so discussions resumed with her. Fortunately, she was familiar with the proposed study, was supportive and had no hesitation in agreeing to send an email to the graduates. Appendix B contains the text of that email.

There was an anxious wait to see how many potential interviewees would respond. Over the following few weeks, eleven graduates responded directly to the researcher via email, indicating that they were willing to cooperate and were prepared to share their DCU journey and beyond. Following discussions with the thesis supervisor, the researcher was satisfied that this number was sufficient for the nature of the study. Patton (2015, p.314) suggests, that while sample size adequacy is a matter for “peer review, consensual validation and judgement”, what is critical is that the procedures and decisions are fully described, explained and justified. Eventually, nine of the initial eleven respondents were interviewed. Despite responding enthusiastically and early to the initial exploratory email, two graduates did not respond to follow up emails. Each of the nine who did follow up received an email with an invitation to arrange an interview (Appendix C). The plain language statement

(Appendix D), and the Informed Consent form (Appendix E) were also provided. The next step in the process was to proceed to data collection.

### 3.11. Data collection in case study research

Yin (2014) outlines six common sources that may be considered in the collection of data for case study research. He indicates that no one source has a complete advantage over the others but that they are, in fact, complementary (Yin, 2014, p.105).

*Table 3.3: Data collection sources in case study research*

Source	Strength	Weaknesses
<b>Documentation</b>	Stable – can be reviewed repeatedly Unobtrusive – not created as a result of case-study Specific – can contain exact names, references, and details of an event Broad – can cover a long time, many events, and many settings	Irretrievability – can be difficult to find Biased selectivity if the collection is incomplete Reporting bias – reflects the bias of any given document’s author Access may be withheld
<b>Archival records</b>	Same as those for documentation Precise and usually quantitative	Same as those for documentation Accessibility due to privacy reasons
<b>Interviews</b>	Targeted – focuses directly on case study topics Insightful – provides explanations as well as personal views (e.g. perceptions, attitudes, and meanings)	Bias due to poorly articulated questions Response bias Inaccuracies due to poor recall Reflexivity – interviewee gives what interviewer wants to hear
<b>Direct observations</b>	Immediacy – covers actions in real-time Contextual – can cover the case’s context	Time-consuming for observers Selectivity – broad coverage difficult without a team of observers Reflexivity – actions may proceed differently because they are being observed
<b>Participant observation</b>	Same as above for direct observations  Insightful into interpersonal behaviour and motives	Same for direct observations  Bias due to participant observer’s manipulation of events
<b>Physical artefacts</b>	Insightful into cultural features Insightful into technical operation	Selectivity Availability

Source: Yin (2014, p.105)

The data sources used in this case study involved archival records, document analysis, semi-interviews with graduates, and interviews with directors of two university access programmes.

### **3.12. Principles of data collection**

To maximise the benefits of the data sources used and to ensure rigour and reliability, Yin (2014) advocates the following four principles of data collection.

- Use multiple sources of evidence
- Create a case study database
- Maintain a chain of evidence
- Exercise care when using data from electronic sources.

#### *Use Multiple Sources of Evidence*

Yin, (2014) considers multiple sources of evidence to be one of the major strengths of case study approach leading to more convincing and accurate findings. Patton (2015, p.662) also advocates bringing together different kinds of data to “illuminate various aspects of a phenomenon”. This study considers the views of nine graduates as well as the directors of the access programmes. Additionally, the available Uaneen portfolios and pre-interview background notes were used extensively.

#### *Create a Case Study Database*

Yin (2014) stresses the importance of each case study research project developing a formal, presentable database. This database should be distinct from the report generated from the investigation. The raw data in this research includes interview recordings, verbatim interview transcripts, field notes, and documents for analysis. As the research progressed, and each set of data was analysed, it was transferred into a different folder to separate it from the raw data. For example, the audio recordings of the interviews are stored in a separate folder than the transcribed interviews, and each is clearly labelled. The interview transcripts, the Uaneen portfolios, the background notes and the researcher’s journal notes were transferred to NVivo for analysis, where they are ordered and labelled.

### *Maintain a Chain of Evidence*

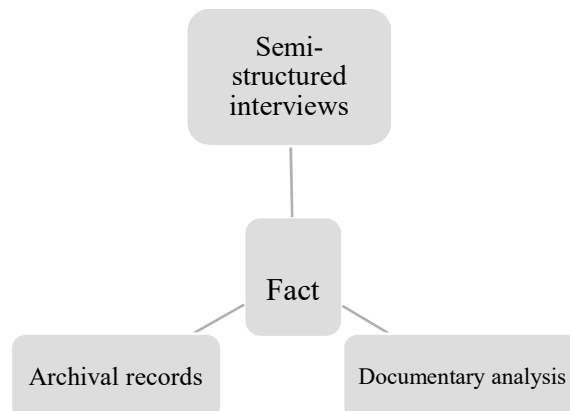
The third principle Yin outlines is the maintenance of a chain of evidence. This principle is to allow the reader of the case study to follow how the ultimate case study conclusions were derived from the initial research questions, through each of the intervening steps. An inspection of the database should allow the reader to see evidence of how and when the evidence (data) was collected (Yin, 2014).

### *Exercise Care when Using Data from Electronic Sources*

Yin's fourth principle refers to the "wealth of electronic information" available to researchers and the importance of exercising discernment and careful judgement when accessing these sources (Yin, 2014). Caution was exercised when using electronic sources and primarily involved consulting online journals or databases via the DCU university library.

## **3.13. The Data Collection process**

The following section details how the data was gathered using three of the sources identified by Yin (2014) as being necessary for the conduct of the case study.



*Figure 3.4: Convergence of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014, p.121)*

### **3.13.1. Documentation**

Documents collected during the gathering of the data stage can provide a rich source of evidence. Yin identifies that the most important use of documents is “to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2014, p.107). Stake (1995) too considers documents as potential sources of data in case study research and contends that almost every study will find some need for examining them. He advises using them judiciously weighing up their potential usefulness and at all times to “be open for unexpected clues”. Documents used as sources in this study include:

- Dublin City University Strategic Plan, 2017 – 2022. Talent, Discovery and Transformation
- Uaneen Module Learning Outcomes
- DCU Access Impact Report 2017 – 2018. (Dublin City University, 2018)
- DCU Access Outreach and Engagement Strategy 2016-2020
- Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2017
- Uaneen Module portfolios submitted by participants
- Archival records

### **3.13.2. Archival Records**

Similar to documentary artefacts, archival records may also be relevant (Yin, 2014). Although potentially relevant, he advises researchers to ascertain the conditions under which documents were produced and to confirm their accuracy. The records used in this study include data related to graduates of both the Uaneen module and the DCU Access programme. The university’s Institutional Research Department supplied the data.

### **3.13.3. Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews are a means of conducting a purposeful discussion between two or more people, which should be “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (Yin, 2009, p.106) and are considered an essential source of case study information. They are an effective method of learning about, and understanding, the experiences, feelings and views of the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.36) provide a wonderful image of “an undiluted focus on the individual” as a key feature of interviews. Kvale (1996, p.145) outlines what he believes are the qualities of the “ideal” interview, including the extent to which the interviewer gathers “spontaneous, rich and relevant answers” from the interviewee and the recommendation that “the shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the subject’s answers the better”. Mindful of this advice, the researcher was careful not to ask over-elaborate or complicated questions or to proffer opinions, all the while bearing in mind that an “interview is a conversation that has a purpose and a structure” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.3).

A skilful interviewer will maximise the interview opportunity by engagement techniques such as establishing rapport and asking thoughtful questions that indicate the interviewer is listening carefully. Equally critical is the ability to know when to stay silent and allow the interviewee to talk freely without interruptions or comment. Although the interviews were conversational and relaxed, the researcher was conscious that this was not an everyday conversation and needed to abide by the “rules of the game” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.49). While the interview guide was designed to give a degree of structure to the interview, at the same time, interviews were kept relatively flexible so that the participants were able to express their views without the rigidity of fixed guidelines fully. This flexibility allowed the participants and the researcher the freedom to drive the conversation outside the list of questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). A flexible format is also useful as it allows the researcher to gain further clarification of the participants’ answers, to respond to the situation at hand, while engaging with the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to gather new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 2009).



#### **3.13.4. Pilot interview**

The term “pilot study” may refer to a mini version of a full-scale study or to the specific pre-testing of a particular research instrument such as a questionnaire or, as is the case in this study, an interview schedule (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). Patton (2002) suggests that while conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study; it does increase the likelihood of success. Yin (2014) differentiates between a pilot study and a pre-test, suggesting that a pilot study is more formative and allows for the development of lines of questioning. It was decided to conduct a pilot interview with one participant before beginning the interviews to examine the interview schedule for its suitability, to elicit suggestions for improvement and to provide an opportunity for the researcher to do a “dry run” in a less formal setting. Convenience and geographical proximity were the main criteria for selection of the participant (Yin, 2014). Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) suggest including pilot qualitative interview data in the main study so, with the informed consent of the participant, this has been included. Overall, the pilot interview was a positive experience and proved to be a worthwhile exercise. Following a suggestion from the participant, two questions (Q9 and Q10) were merged. The researcher used the revised interview guide in the subsequent interviews.

#### **3.13.5. Conducting the interviews**

Through semi-structured interviews, the aim was to gain in-depth insights of the participants into their experience of involvement in extracurricular activities and to reflect on how it may have affected them, personally and professionally. Participants were assigned a code known only to the researcher, which is used to identify them throughout the study. All data is stored on the researcher’s laptop, which is encrypted, and password protected.

Once the initial agreement to be part of the study was secured, suitable dates, times and locations were agreed. Each of the interviews followed a similar pattern. The participants were invited to meet at a location of their choice. The option of coming to a private meeting space on the DCU Glasnevin campus was also offered. This is the option they all choose. Given their prior involvement with a range of activities based there, the room was

comfortable and familiar for them. Some expressed the view that it was a welcome opportunity to revisit the campus. At all times, the researcher aimed to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and at ease and to convey to them their opinions were valued and respected (Kvale, 1996). The aim was to adopt a position of “empathic neutrality” (Patton, 2015, p.457), understanding their perspective, not judging and being authentic to build trust and rapport. As all the participants had willingly volunteered to be part of the study and were doing so without duress or reward, this was considerably more attainable than may be the case in more difficult or sensitive circumstances.

Although a fuller discussion on the ethical considerations pertinent to the study follows later in the chapter, the topic of ethical interviewing will now be considered.

### 3.13.6. Ethical interviewing

As research conducted within a constructivist epistemology relies heavily on the spoken word; conversations, narratives or interviews (Gergen, 2001), particular attention must be paid to ensure the integrity of the interview process. Kvale (1996) notes that ethical issues permeate interview research. Of particular note is the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees with, he claims, the interviewer’s ability to create conditions where the interviewees feel safe to talk, being crucial. The ethical considerations outlined below proved to be a valuable checklist to protect the participants’ integrity during the process.

*Table 3.1: Ethical considerations in the interview process*

Before the interview	During the interview	After the interview
Unpressurised decision - making about taking part. Research is independent and legitimate	Being able to exercise the right not to answer a question or to say more than they want	Right to privacy and anonymity respected in storage, access and reporting of the research
Knowing why they were selected to be approached	An unpressurised pace with time to think Feeling comfortable and at ease, valued and respected, not intimidated or judged	Unbiased and accurate reporting Opportunity for feedback on findings and use

	Opportunity for self-expression and for own views to be recorded	
Clear and worthwhile objective, purpose and intended purpose	Questions are relevant, not repetitive and clear	Use is accurately made of the research for social or worthwhile benefits
Knowing what to expect and being able to prepare, especially in terms of coverage and questioning Openness, honesty and being able to correct misunderstandings	Left without negative feelings about participation	

Source: Graham *et al.* (2007) quoted in Ritchie *et al.* (2013).

### 3.13.7. VoIP interviews

As four of the participants live outside Ireland, it was agreed that their interviews would be conducted via Skype or another similar VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Coincidentally, it transpired that one of the four was in Ireland to celebrate a significant birthday and he suggested interviewing at the same time. The other three were interviewed via Skype or Facebook messenger, which allowed for video as well as audio and the interviews to be recorded. Allowing researchers to transcend geographical boundaries, by negating distances and eliminating the need “to visit an agreed location for interview” (Rowley 2012. p.264), is one of the great advantages of using Skype or other VoIP technology to conduct interviews in qualitative research. The availability of technology, which facilitated the conduct of three interviews, was extremely advantageous in this study. Although VoIP mediated interviews cannot completely replace face-to-face interaction (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016), in this study the technology was critical.

The interviews conducted in person were digitally recorded with an iPhone. Permission to record was sought in advance, and all of the participants agreed. Having exchanged the usual pleasantries and in advance of any recording, the purpose of the interview was again outlined and further assurances given that it would be used only for the purpose for which it

was intended. Assurances on anonymity were provided, and an outline of the possible questions was provided, with the semi-structured nature of the process emphasised. At all times, flexibility, allowing for adjustments to the line of enquiry (Denscombe, 2010), was the target. Such flexibility is useful as it allows the researcher to gain further clarification of the participants' answers, to respond to the situation at hand, while engaging with the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to be receptive to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 2009).

### **3.13.8. Transcription**

A researcher gains familiarity, and often intimacy, with the case data from recording, listening, transcribing, proofreading and searching for codes, patterns and themes. The researcher transcribed the first five interviews verbatim as soon as practicable afterwards. The remaining six were transcribed using an online transcription service. The requisite subsequent editing ensured a level of familiarity and intimacy comparable with the earlier researcher transcribed interviews. Although the interviews were transcribed verbatim, some of the respondents' quotations used in the findings section were tidied up to provide clarity of meaning. The transcriptions, with the files coded and no identifiers used, are stored on the researcher's laptop, which is encrypted, and password protected.

Recordings and transcripts provide many advantages - firstly, they are a public record; they can be replayed, allowing the transcriber to inspect "sequences of utterances" (Silverman, 2010, p.240). Secondly, during the transcription process, tentative themes can be identified and explored in later interviews, essentially making analysis an ongoing and iterative activity. Thirdly, transcription can jump-start the data analysis process. In this situation, the transcription did serve to jump-start the analysis as it allowed for a more thorough examination of the respondents' utterances as well as permitting repeated examinations of their responses.

Although sometimes described as "a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology" (Bird, 2005, p. 227), transcribing or editing online transcriptions

is a time-consuming and laborious process. Denscombe (2010) estimates that for every one hour of interview recording it generally takes two to three hours of work to transcribe the talk into text. Despite the time commitment, it was worthwhile as the physical act of transcription was the first opportunity to listen to the interviews again – in great detail- as it involved rewinding, relistening and typing repeatedly. Conscious of the fact that there may have been instances in the actual interview when critical replies or nuances were overlooked, the transcription exercise was an opportunity to reflect on the responses in more depth. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) caution about transcriptions and urge the reader not to believe that that they contain everything that took place in the interview. Notwithstanding the weaknesses in transcription, notably the inability to record non-verbal cues and other contextual nuances, it nonetheless proved to be a worthwhile exercise. It presented an opportunity to re-think the conversation and certainly brought the interviewer “close to the data” (Denscombe, 2010, p.178). Moustakas (1994), Van Manen (1990) and Giorgi (2009) all suggest immersion in the data and text multiple times. This “intimate engagement” with the data facilitated by repeated listening, allowed for the identification of ideas and themes and kick-started the data analysis process (Goodson and Sikes. 2001). Figure 3.5 depicts the audit trail of data collection from the semi-structured interview process.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
Assigned Code	Year of Graduation	Course	Comments	Email sent with REC documents	Original Email resent as no response	More	Interviewed	Interview conducted	Notes	Transcribed	Uaneen portfolio supplied	Masters	
DM08	2008	CS	London	Feb 14th	6th March		✓	April 14th		✓	Yes	Yes -later	
GB07	2007	MMA		Jan 10th			✓	Feb 7th	Pilot	✓	yes	NO	
AC11	2011	BS		Feb 14th			✓	10th March		✓	NO	NO	
MM07	2007	CS	New York	Feb 14th			✓	14th Sept	Via Skype	✓	NO	Yes	
LL14	2014	BCL		Feb 14th			✓	March 1st		✓	yes	Yes	
RK15	2015	BSI	In USA	Feb 14th			✓	March 9th	via skype- voice call	✓	yes- on LOOP	Yes	
MM14	2014	JR	New York	Feb 14th			✓	May 8th	via Skype - video call	✓	LOOP	NO	
NC10	2010	ET		Feb 14th			✓	Feb 21st	Suggested sending interview guide in advance	✓	yes	Yes	
JS07	2007	EPL		Feb 16th		Follow up sent on March 7th	✓	May 10th	Only initially responded on 15th Feb	✓	NO	Yes-later	
EM14	2014	BSI		Feb 14th	6th March	Did not respond to follow up mail	NO		Did not follow up	n/a	n/a	n/a	
RT12	2012	BCL		Feb 14th	6th March	Did not respond to follow up mail	NO		Did not follow up	n/a	n/a	n/a	

Figure 3.5: Audit trail of data collection from the semi-structured interview process

### 3.14. Data Analysis strategy

Preparation for the conduct of a case study analysis begins with possessing a general analytic strategy (Yin, 2014). The purpose of the strategy is to link the case study data to concepts of interest. Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus and field have been used as sensitising concepts in the analysis of data, while also working in an inductive way in order to remain open to more grounded ways of understanding the data. Yin (2014, pp. 142-160) suggests five analytical techniques to apply when analysing data sources.

- Pattern matching
- Explanation building
- Time-series analysis
- Logic models
- Cross-case synthesis

Data analysis is the central step in qualitative research (Flick, 2014) and it is the analysis of the collected data that forms the outcomes of the research. Thematic analysis was selected for this study as it is considered a flexible and versatile research tool. It is used within major analytic traditions and compatible with various epistemological and theoretical conceptualisations (Flick, 2014). Braun and Clarke (2006) helpfully expand on this point, by outlining that:

Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines how events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

It traverses traditional qualitative research and quantitative data, allowing researchers to ask more questions about their content. Not confined to any one research method, thematic analysis is used across many fields and disciplines (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It utilises a wide range of data sources, including interview transcripts and other information written by participants, such as diaries or journals (or in this study, the Uaneen portfolios) (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. It inevitably involves some element of coding or classifying data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify or record themes contained therein. Boyatzis (1998, p.4) describes a theme as “a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon”.

Similar to Borrell (2008), who examined concepts of problem gambling agency, this study carried out a thematic analysis within a constructionist framing, strategically focussed on unpicking the surface of reality in engaging with extracurricular activities. This is what Braun and Clarke (2006, p.84) describe as thematic analysis at the latent level which goes beyond the semantic content of the data and begins “to identify or examine the underlying

ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations—and ideologies—that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data”. Braun and Clarke (2019) explain that

[so] doing a good thematic analysis is a combination of following a robust process, applying an analytic eye to the data, and interpreting it in light of what we already know about the issue(s) being explored (Braun and Clarke, 2019, online).

Their (2006) six-step process offers a clear and usable framework for carrying out a thematic analysis and provides a mechanism to minimise the risk of “anything goes” analysis. The data analysis phase followed this framework.

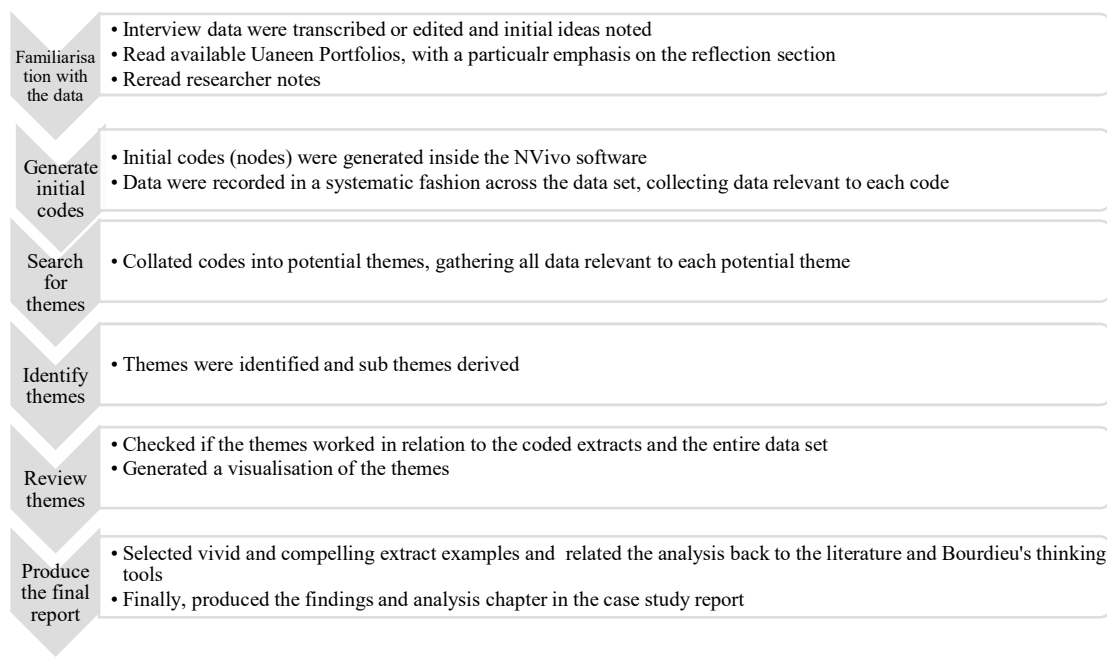


Figure 3.6: Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six Phase Thematic Analysis



### 3.14.1. CAQDAS

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software was developed to handle the task of analysing large volumes of qualitative data. Such software can play a role by managing the data to facilitate the analysis. Patton (2015, p.259), however, sounds a note of caution and advises that software “can’t provide the creativity and intelligence that makes each qualitative analysis unique”. Only humans can do that. Nonetheless, the use of a QDA software package was deemed to be worthwhile given its ability to reduce large volumes of text and other detail-thick data into manageable proportions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Adu (2016, 2019) likens the presentation of findings to sharing a solved puzzle. Rather than burdening the reader with solving the puzzle, the researcher must piece together the puzzle. In other words, findings must be presented in a meaningful way, which enhances the reader’s understanding of the data analysis outcomes. He represents this graphically in Figure 3.7.

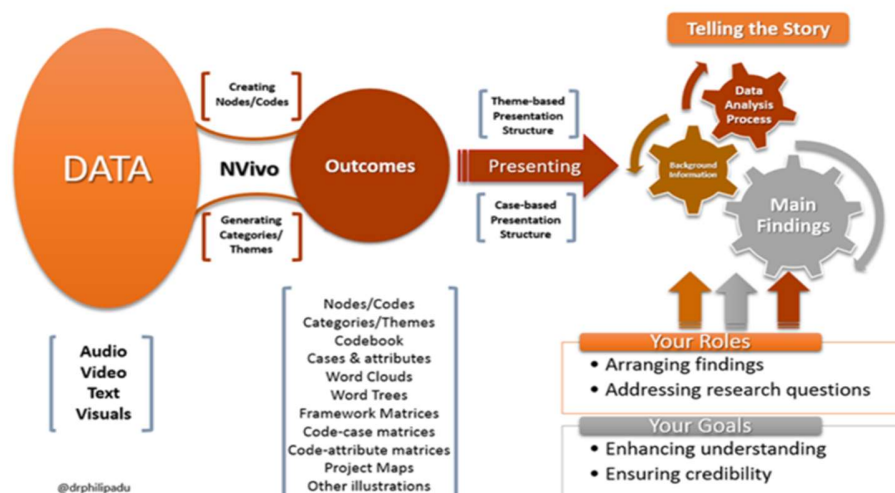


Figure 3.7: Adu's puzzle.

The transcripts of the interviews, the Uaneen portfolios as well as the researcher’s field notes were imported into a sophisticated computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package- NVivo 12. This package was designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based alone or in combination with multimedia information,

where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required. It enables researchers to organise, classify and arrange their information into manageable components so that they might discover patterns and linkages more fluidly in their analysis. So, while it facilitates the analysis of data, it cannot conduct the analysis by itself. The data were organised, analysed and presented as empirical evidence through a range of NVivo visualisations. Visualisation facilitates further exploration, identification of new and interesting themes and a sense of the larger trends and provide an easy and effective way to communicate findings with the reader.

Mindful that the “keyness” of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important concerning the overall research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82), the analysis process commenced with a word frequency query in the data. The query was controlled for common words such as “the”, “like”, “such” and “and”. The screenshot below in figure 3.8 shows, “access”, “school”, “first”, “university”, “different”, “extra”, “curricular”, friends, “involved” and “remember” to be amongst the words with the highest frequency. As recommended in step two of the Braun and Clarke process, these were identified initially only as potential themes that may require further exploring as the analysis investigates each data input systematically. An NVivo word cloud (Figure 3.9) provides perhaps a clearer visualisation of this query.

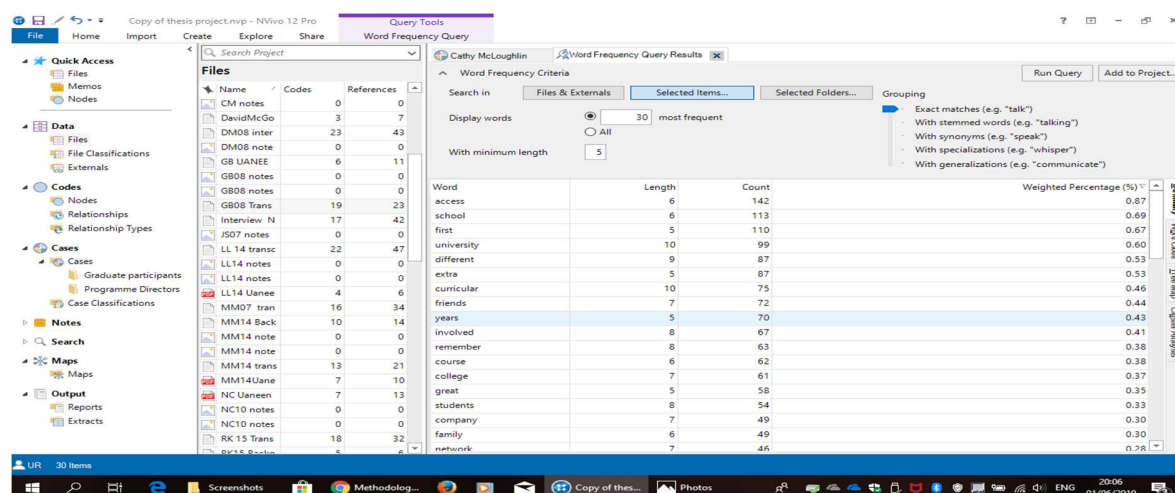


Figure 3.8: Querying the data to learn about word frequency as a starting point

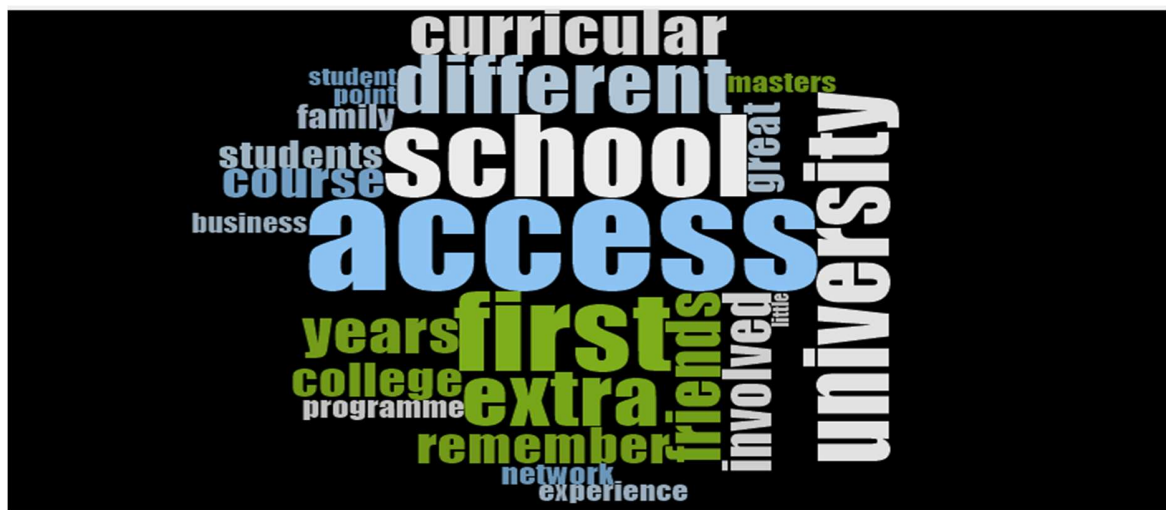


Figure 3.9: Representing the results of a word frequency query in an NVivo word cloud.

Nvivo allows for further exploration of the prevalence of the most frequent words. It also allows for an examination of their use in sentences. Figures 3.10 and 3.11 below illustrate the results of a query for the word “access”. Visualisation aids such as these add to the data analysis, and it was repeated for the most frequently found words in an attempt to provide further signposts.

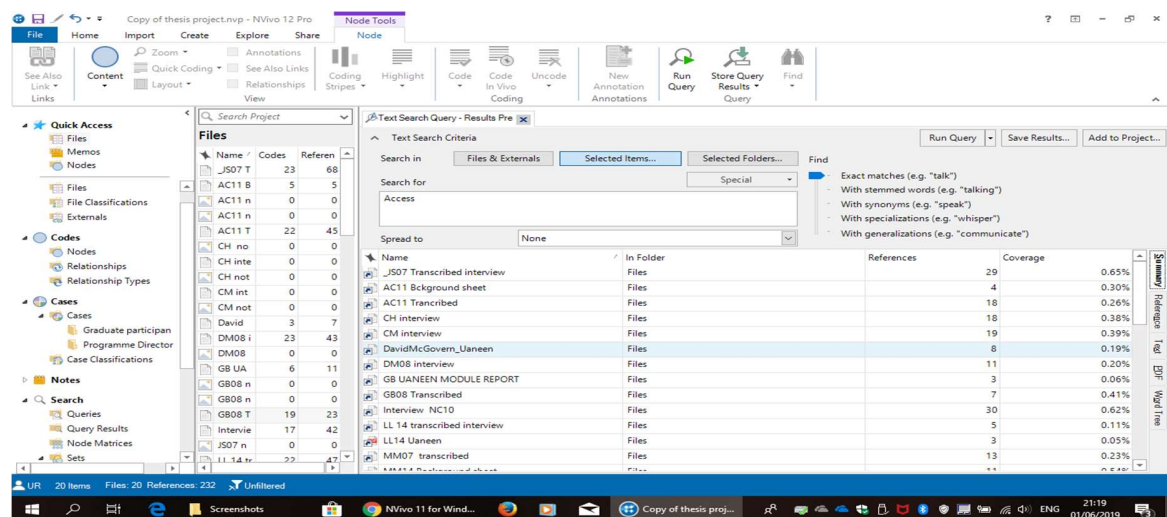


Figure 3.10: Nvivo sample query for mentions of “access” in interviews, portfolios and researchers notes- Summary format

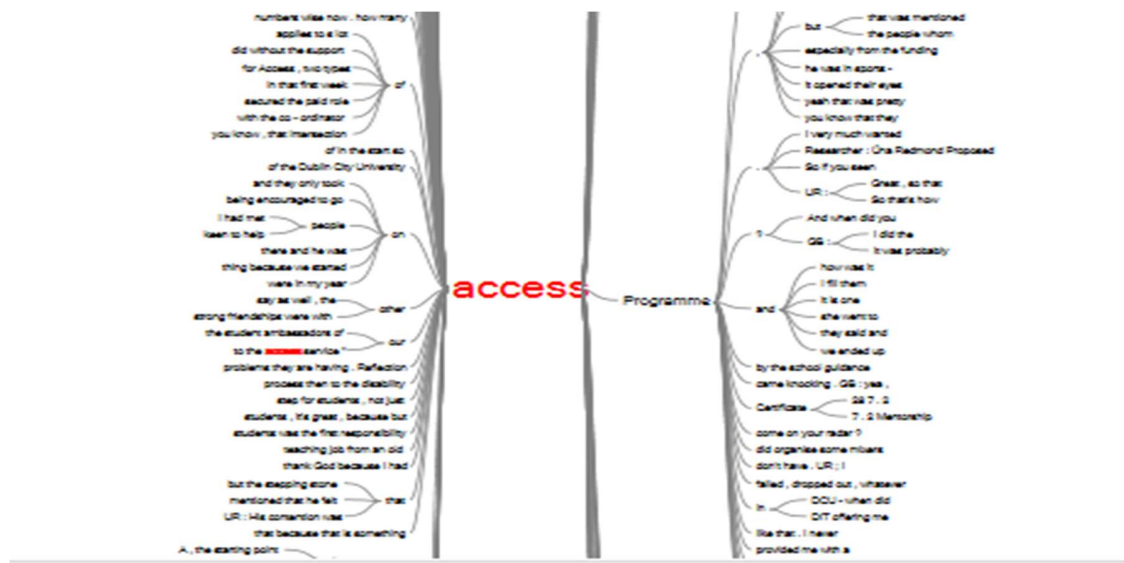


Figure 3.11: Nvivo sample query for mentions of “access” in interviews, portfolios and researcher’s notes- Word tree format

This exercise was repeated for the next most frequently mentioned word “school”, and the resultant word tree is reproduced below.

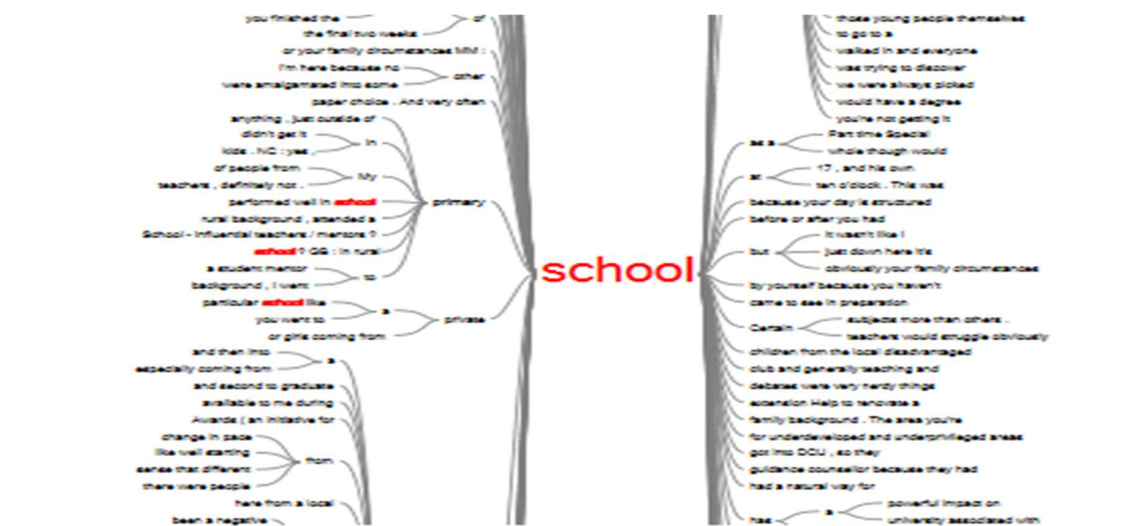


Figure 3.12: Nvivo sample query for mentions of “school” in interviews, portfolios groups and researcher’s notes- Word tree format

The “branches” of the tree act as interactive links back to the original data sources. These interactive links allow for an examination of which participants in which locations mention

a particular word. While this initial signposting is a valuable first step, it is not sufficient to provide the context or the qualitative meaning of the utterance. It was necessary to return to the interview transcripts and Uaneen portfolios and reread them to seek the exact meaning contained therein. The common topics were deemed “codes”, and the transcripts were highlighted to represent them. In NVivo terminology codes are called nodes, and these initial ones “parent nodes”. As the information was categorised into the more popular codes, sets of sub-codes were introduced to allow for further differentiation and more nuanced analysis. NVivo uses the term “child nodes” to describe such sub-codes. This repeated search for themes, achieved by moving back and forth through the data to produce more definite themes facilitated step three of the thematic analysis process.

Figure 3.13 below displays how mentions of “access” were subdivided into three categories; comments about access pre DCU, comments about access during the participants’ time in DCU and comments about giving back to access. NVivo shows the parent and child nodes to the left-hand side and a selection of the comments about giving back to access on the right.

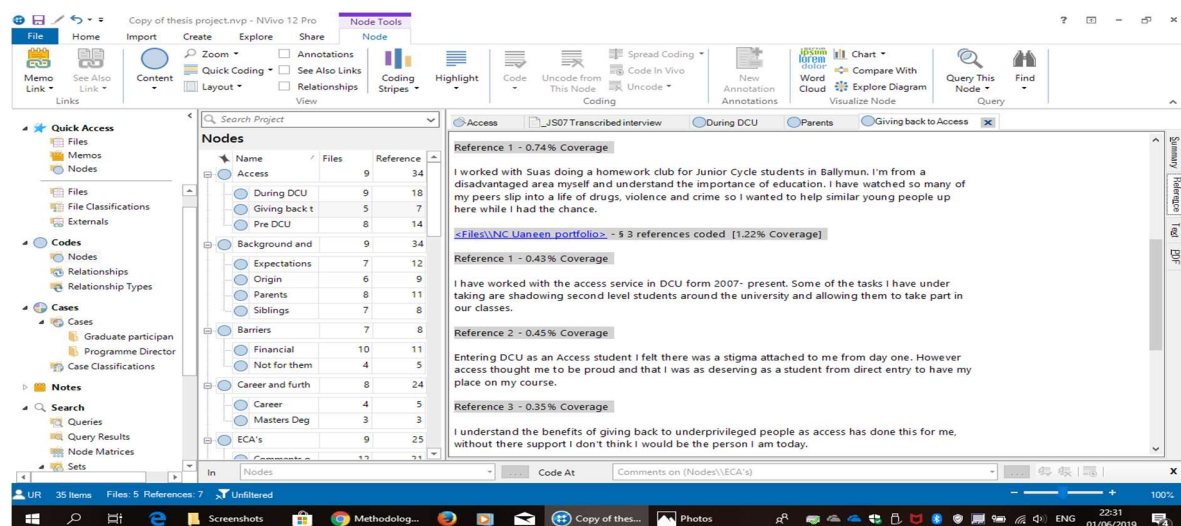


Figure 3.13: Example of parent nodes, child nodes and coded content in relation to access

It was necessary to return to the data repeatedly, to decode, recode and merge codes to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Each data set was read and re-read numerous times and the coding revised as necessary. NVivo shows the full set of transcribed interviews, portfolios and



researcher's notes to the left and a coded sample of the text to the right. Coloured coding stripes on the extreme right show the different themes extracted from the text.

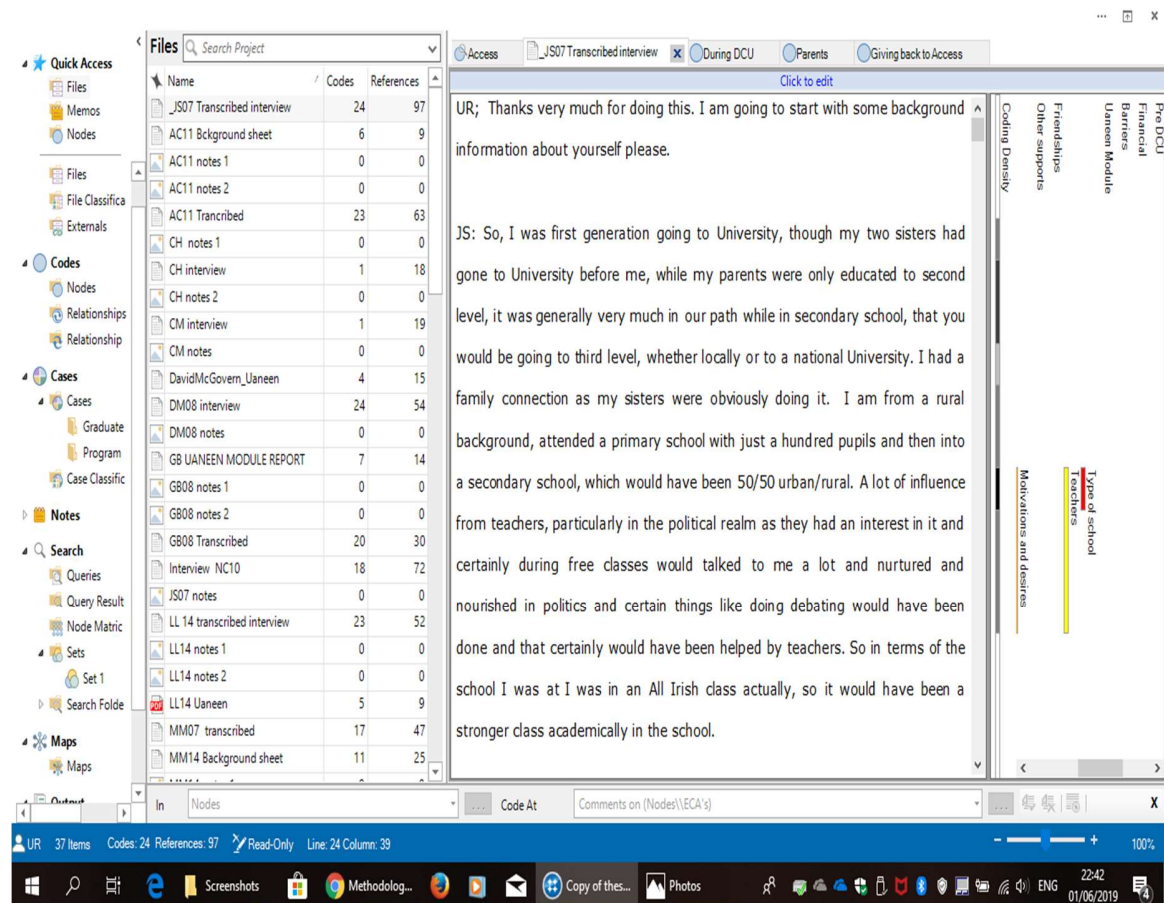
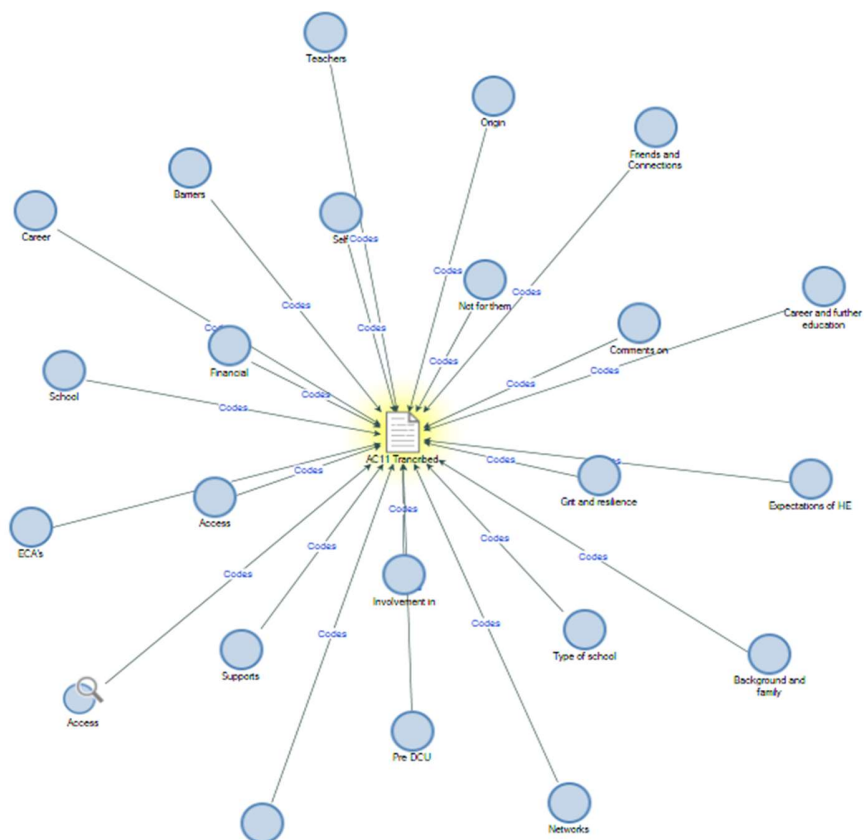


Figure 3.14: NVivo coding details of an interview transcript

Using NVivo, it is possible to query the data once the raw data has been divided into sections and subsections. It offers many analysis and query options that facilitated the exploration of patterns and allowed the researcher to draw reasonable conclusions. Figure 3.15 below displays a graphic of how NVivo enabled analysis and querying of the interview transcript of one of the participants.



*Figure 3.15: An NVivo explore diagram displaying an analysis of the interview transcript of AC11*

Similarly, it is possible to run a query on a particular code to ascertain where the mentions are located in the data. This interactive feature allows for a revisiting of source information as meanings begin to crystallise and allowed those quotations that best represented the pertinent themes in the final report to be selected. The figure (3.16) below indicates the locations of comments on extracurricular activities.

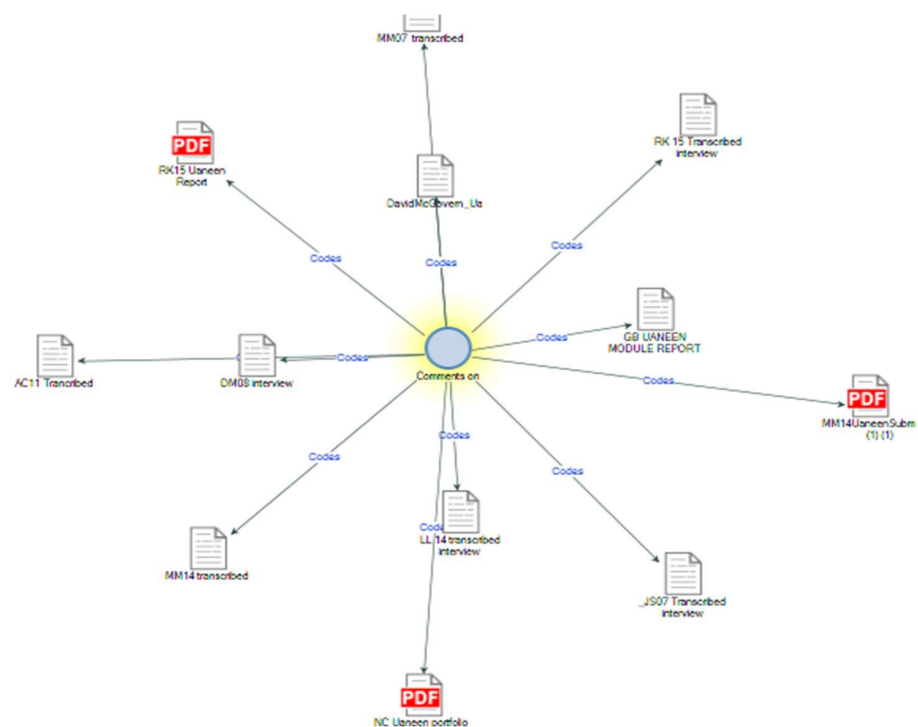


Figure 3.16: An NVivo Explore Diagram: 21 comments on extracurricular activities from 12 sources

Nodes			
Name	Files	References	
Settling and surviving		4	1
Part time work		3	
Other supports		5	
Grit and resilience		8	1
Finacial		3	
Barriers		7	
Access		9	3
Expectations, motivations and desires		6	1
Self		8	1
School		5	1
Others		2	
Background and family		9	3
Engaging and Developing		9	2
Uaneen Module		6	
Involvement in		10	1
Gains		5	1
Comments on		12	2
Creating capital		8	2
Masters Degree		3	
Friends and Connections		9	2
Career		4	

Figure 3.17: Aggregated NVivo findings



The fifth phase followed with further defining and refining of themes, which involved examining the themes for possible sub-themes that further illuminated and developed the main theme. Braun and Clarke explain (2006, p.92) “by ‘define and refine’, we mean identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures”. The four major themes, which resulted from the data analysis, are represented in Figure 3.18 below. These findings are presented in a detailed narrative in chapter four.



*Figure 3.18: Resultant themes from the data analysis*

### **3.15. Ethical considerations**

Yin (2017, p.87) declares, “A good case study researcher, like any other social scientist, will strive for the highest ethical standards while doing research” since the study of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context brings with it ethical obligations akin to those in medical research (Yin, 2014). Because of the close involvement of the researcher with the research process and with the participants, ethical risks and concerns are greater in qualitative research than in quantitative research. The considerable interpretative latitude enjoyed by the researcher compounds this.

Ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm; therefore, the protection of human subjects or participants in any research study is imperative. The rights of human subjects are protected by ensuring that the risks of participating in the research are not greater than those of everyday life, that participants are informed and consent to participate in the research, and that they have the opportunity to withdraw from the research. The application of appropriate ethical principles prevents or reduces harm.

In common with all research involving human subjects or animal subjects undertaken in the university, this study required ethical approval from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (REC). The REC exists to promote the highest ethical standards in all such research at the University. Its primary aim is to ensure all research participants are respected and their rights promoted. Following the required DCU REC guidelines, ethical approval for this study was sought and was duly approved (Appendix F). Aside from the obvious aim of protecting the participants in a study, ethical approval enhances the inquiry by providing legitimacy (Silverman, 2010) and the benefit of advice from an expert panel for potential flaws.

Securing ethical approval is merely the first step on the ethical journey, but as highlighted by Yin (2017), it is a vital and essential step in conducting research in an ethical fashion. To this end, researchers must consider carefully the ethical issues that may arise within the course of their study. Bassey (1999, pp.73-74) discusses research ethics under three headings which capture succinctly and simply what it means to conduct research ethically. The first, respect for democracy, refers to the researcher's freedom to conduct research. This freedom, he proposes, brings with it the twin responsibilities of respect for truth and respect for people. Respect for the truth is self-explanatory and presupposes truthfulness in data collection, analysis and reporting. Recognising people's ownership of data and affording them dignity, respect and privacy all contribute to respecting participants. Silverman (2010, pp. 155-156) outlines what he considers to be ethical research and, although more detailed than Bassey's (1999) summation, the basic principles are unchanged. They provide a useful checklist to reference in advance of embarking on a research project. These include questions about what

is required of participants, how will the research be explained to them, how will their anonymity and confidentiality be protected and are there communication barriers between the researcher and the participants. The checklist also challenges the researcher to be diligent about data collection and storage and to ensure that the study is harm free. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) discuss ethical dilemmas, which can arise in relation to privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, betrayal, and deception and it was crucial therefore to reassure the participants about these issues. Each participant received the informed consent form and the plain language statement in advance of the scheduled interview. Before each interview, it was again outlined to them how their information and their interview data would be treated. The researcher expressed a note of thanks to each for their cooperation.

#### **3.15.1. Interviews with elites**

Elite interviews refer to interviews with persons who are leaders or experts in a community. They are usually in powerful positions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The “elites” in this study are the Directors of two University access programmes. Dexter (1970) observes that in elite interviewing the interviewer must be willing to let the interviewee teach them and listen to their observations on the problem, the question, or the situation. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) cite how obtaining access to such interviewees may potentially be difficult. Access was not an issue in this study. The DCU staff member was already fully on board, and the other director responded positively to a speculative email containing the details of the study. Both interviews were conducted in the respondents’ offices. Chronologically, the interview with the non-DCU director took place first and at a stage when tentative themes were emerging. No interview guide was provided in advance, and the interview was used to explore the thoughts and feelings of the “informant” (Yin, 2014, p.239) on the emerging themes as outlined by the researcher. The interview with the head of the DCU Access Department took place at a later stage, and she was provided with a draft findings chapter. She offered valuable confirmation and validation in addition to identifying issues, which may be relevant for access students in the current climate, which did not feature in the research. She highlighted the increasing trend of students commuting long distances daily to attend university. She speculated that this phenomenon was not as prevalent when

the participants were attending DCU as the rented accommodation crisis was not as acute. The contribution of these elites was considered an important component of the triangulation process.

### **3.15.2. Insider research**

Small-scale practitioner research in education has risen in the past twenty-five years. The rise may be explained, in part, by the proliferation of Masters and Doctoral programmes offered by Schools of Education (Mercer, 2007). Many of the students enrolled in these programmes complete them on a part-time basis and continue with their regular jobs. This situation often gives rise to a scenario where their school or college becomes their research site bringing with it an attendant rise in the phenomenon of insider researcher.

Kanuha (2000) explores the challenges presented by the complexity of being both an insider with intimate knowledge of the participants and an outsider as a researcher. Although in this situation, there was no ongoing relationship with the participants, there are some elements of insider researcher in evidence (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Unluer, 2012). Insider research describes research in which the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting and contrasts with the traditional ideals of scientific research where the researcher is considered an “objective outsider” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Brannick and Coghlan (2007, p.59) argue in favour of insider research and claim “there is no inherent reason why being native is an issue”. They advocate that potential inside researchers should engage in the process of reflexivity to understand the strengths and limits of their pre-understanding. Reflection is necessary to minimise the possibility that the researcher’s prior, tacit knowledge may distort results by leading to misinterpretations or false assumptions. Engagement in such a process allows for a reframing of the understanding of close situations. Costerly, Gibbs and Elliott (2010, p.33) emphasise the importance of articulating one’s perspective or premise clearly:

“your insights as an insider are valuable because of your depth of knowledge, but you should also demonstrate that you understand alternative perspectives”.

Clearly, it is necessary to understand one's professional self in relation to one's personal self.

For context, it is worth noting that the researcher in this study is module co-ordinator for the Uaneen Module, in addition to being a module marker and a mentor to several enrolled students. It is critical to note that the researcher was also instrumental in introducing this module to Dublin City University and has researched, campaigned and championed the value of a holistic university education and the learning to be derived from engagement with extracurricular activities for almost twenty years. Passionate about extracurricular activities and the significant role they play in the lives of the students; the researcher was careful to hold personal beliefs in check throughout the research process. Mindful also of a "particular social identity and background" (Robson, 2002) and its potential impact on the research process, the researcher was cautious about sharing too much of her educational journey. To preserve the integrity of the process and out of respect for the research participants, a concerted effort was made to learn about the participants' views while keeping personal opinions and assumptions out of the interview process. Bourdieu (1993, p.37) observed, "Intellectuals tend to leave out of play their own game and their own stakes".

As the module co-ordinator, the researcher has intimate and extensive knowledge of the intricacies of the module, yet no ongoing relationship with the participants involved in the study. All graduated from the university between four and twelve years ago. The researcher and the Access Department collaborate on projects on an ongoing basis, so there is an element of insider research in this situation. Admittedly, the DCU Access Department is not the primary focus of the study, but it does feature prominently in the accounts of the participants, in particular when recollecting their early days in the university. The study also shines a light on the Uaneen module, and the ongoing challenge was for the researcher to maintain a professional perspective and avoid any hint of researcher bias which Robson (2002) describes as the assumptions and preconceptions that the researcher brings. Such assumptions and preconceptions may affect the choice of the research subject, the questions asked or the selection of what to report.

Researchers should make regular efforts to consider their thoughts and actions in light of different contexts and “Bourdieuian” scholars must be reflexive in both their use of Bourdieu and in their methodology (Stahl, 2016, p.1096). Periods of reflection undertaken at crucial design and implementation junctures may provide a valuable exercise in honouring both the research process and participant’s voice. This process of becoming self-aware (reflexivity) involves a researcher’s ongoing critique and critical reflection of their own biases and assumptions. Reflexivity involves examining and being aware of the impact of the researcher’s life and work experience, gender, ethnicity, age and social class on the process of research. It also requires an acknowledgement and exploration of the power dynamics within the research relationships. As Malterud (2001, pp.483-484) observes, “a researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions”. Lynch (1999, p.5) strikes a cautionary reminder of the limits of self-reflectivity claiming, “Many of the values and assumptions which we hold most dearly are those that are least likely to be subject to critical reflection”. A more detailed discussion on reflexivity follows.

### **3.16. Reflexivity**

One of the distinctive features of a Bourdieusian approach is a “signature obsession with reflexivity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.36) and Costa and Murphy (2016, p.53) refer to his “fixation with reflexivity”. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.183) explain that “reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher; the human as instrument”. The concept, therefore, emphasises self-awareness, cultural awareness and the researcher’s ability to be mindful at all times of their perspective and its potential impact on all elements of the research process (Crotty 1998; Ahern, 1999; Patton, 2002). In essence, the researcher must strive for a position of neutrality. This should be based on an underlying implication that the research is free from bias and is independent of the perspectives, background, position, or conditioning circumstances of the researcher (Given, 2008).

Patton (2002, p.14) contends that to achieve neutrality, the researcher must “enter the research arena with no axe to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove) and no predetermined results to support”. At no stage should the researcher “set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths”. Absolute neutrality is difficult, if not impossible to achieve as their prior social interactions and circumstances condition all humans and researchers subconsciously bring their social and intellectual positions to the process (Murphy and Costa, 2015). Mindful of the centrality of reflectivity in a Bourdieusian approach, what is required, therefore, is reflexivity across all facets of the process. By engaging with reflexivity, research becomes a process of self-analysis in which researchers attempt to grasp at a conscious level their dispositions to make sense of their research (Mills and Gale, 2007). Acknowledging that this practice may not always come naturally or easily to the researcher, Ahern (1999, pp.408-409) proposes some guidelines to facilitate the reflexive process.

- Identify some of the interests that as a researcher might be taking for granted when undertaking the research.
- Clarify personal value systems and acknowledge areas of subjectivity.
- Describe any areas of potential role conflict.
- Once fieldwork has commenced becoming attuned to feelings that may signal the need for reflexive thought.
- Recognise any feelings, which may indicate a lack of neutrality.
- Identify if there is anything new or surprising in data collection and analysis.  
Is this a cause for concern?
- If blocks occur, rather than expressing frustration, reframe the process.
- Consider if the supporting literature is actually supporting the analysis or is it just expressing a similar cultural background.

She also advocates keeping a journal to enhance the reflexivity (Ahern, 1999) during the entire process. Considered a means of collecting data in qualitative research (Janesick, 1999), it can make one's experiences, opinions, thoughts, and feelings visible and may become a part of the research design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation process (Ortlipp,

2008). This advice confirmed the natural inclination of the researcher and was embraced. This journal chronicles the personal experience of the researcher in carrying out the research. The act of writing personal opinions, concerns and feelings relating to every stage of the research process allowed for greater awareness of the researcher's assumptions and underlying values about the research project. This self-understanding and self-reflection may strengthen the research (Thomson and Walker, 2010) and takes account of the emotional nature of learning. The journal included a section specifically for comment and reflection on the interviews. Following each interview, a journal entry was made. These entries consist of a mixture of observations, thoughts on how the interview played out, what might be improved for subsequent interviews, and some self-criticism. It also involved noting interesting thoughts or observations for exploration with subsequent participants. This approach resulted in more focused interviews while still allowing participants the flexibility to share their experiences and their thoughts openly. This journaling process facilitated an ongoing critique and critical reflection and helped minimise any bias derived from the position occupied by the researcher (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) as module coordinator. In some instances, further entries were made following the transcription process. The topics, which were used to aid with this reflexivity, are detailed in Appendix G. Some sample entries are also included (Appendix H).

### **3.17. Trustworthiness**

Yin (2014) emphasises the power of high-quality case study research that focuses on rigour, validity and reliability. Yazan (2015) provides a synopsis of Yin's guidelines to achieve this: a) construct validity must be guaranteed, through the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence, chains of evidence, and member checking, b) internal validity, which is not relevant for exploratory case studies, should use established analytic techniques such as pattern matching and external validity may be achieved through analytic generalization. Finally, following case study and database protocols assures reliability.



### **3.18. Triangulation**

Yin (2014) advises that in collecting case study data, the main idea is to “triangulate” or establish converging lines of evidence to make findings as robust and rigorous as possible. He suggests reviewing data through triangulation processes: data triangulation based on various data sources and investigator triangulation by using different evaluators. Other triangulation processes include theory triangulation, that is reviewing the same data from differing points of view and methodological triangulation, which is achieved by using a variety of methods. Similarly, Stake (2006, p.107) identifies triangulation as a quality assurance tactic to ensure that case study research is based on a disciplined approach and “not simply a matter of intuition, good intention and common sense”. Such convergence of the gathered evidence serves to increase the reliability of the data (Tellis, 1997). Methodological triangulation, between and within - methods, data triangulation and investigator triangulation, have similarly been identified (Denscombe, 2010) as possible ways of achieving triangulation. Qualitative research includes documents as a major source of data to be collected, and the participants’ portfolios may form a base for comparison with the newly collected interview data (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). Public records, personal papers, popular culture documents, visual documents, physical materials and artefacts are all considered as data for case study research (Merriam, 2009). In this study, data triangulation is achieved by the inclusion of quantitative background data and secondary analysis of the data contained in the previously submitted Uaneen module portfolios. The inclusion of the previously submitted portfolios allowed for a comparison and a crosschecking of the interview data to support the trustworthiness and authenticity of the participants. The comparison exercise strengthened the overall construct validity of the study.

### **3.19. Validity of findings**

Maintaining a chain of evidence during the data collection process, similar to that used in forensic investigations (Yin, 2014), enhances the validity of the findings and allows an external researcher to trace the steps of the process in either direction. A thorough audit trail, consisting of a detailed collection of the research documentation (Given, 2008) was maintained and documented throughout the process. Given (2008) suggests that an audit trail

may include examples of the coding process, descriptions of how individual codes were worked into themes, and the rationale for what codes were clustered together to form the basis of a theme. Examples of this process are included in the data analysis section.

### **3.20. Generalisation of findings**

A further test of validity deals with the extent to which the study's findings are generalizable beyond the study in question. Lincoln and Guba (1985) talk about 'naturalistic generalisation', a concept introduced by Stake (1978) in his discussion of case study methods. As Stake declares:

What becomes useful understanding is a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts. That knowledge is a form of generalization, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural co-variations of happenings (Stake, 1978, p.6).

Patton (2015, p.718) offers transferability and extrapolation as solutions to what he terms "the qualitative approach to the challenge of generalizing". Bassey (1999, p.12) introduces the notion of "fuzzy generalisation" which deals with the likelihood that is evident in a single case may also be evident in other situations. Similarly, Denscombe (2010) claims that it is possible to generalise from case study research based on the extent to which the single case is a single example of a broader class of thing. In any event, qualitative research does not seek to provide statistical generalisation: it is more interested in detailed descriptions of the idiographic (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The extent to which the findings of this study may be generalised to other areas is a matter of judgement for those who become intimately acquainted with them.

### **3.21. Member checking**

Member checking shifts the validity procedure from the researchers to participants in the study. Yin (2014, p.199), commenting on the practice of presenting the findings to the participants for review, claimed that, when "the process has been given careful attention, the

potential result is the production of a high-quality case study". Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.314) describe member checks as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" in a study. Member checking was carried out by returning the findings to the participants to allow them to confirm the credibility of the information and the narrative account (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), to ensure they were happy with their contribution and to make amendments, where desired. One participant suggested minor changes to provide more context for two of his quotes. Otherwise, the feedback was positive and encouraging. *"This looks good to me. Very interesting to read about the different experiences. Access was a great gift in my life. Best of luck with finalising everything!" (MM14.)*

### **3.22. Reliability**

The goal of reliability is to minimise the errors and bias in a study (Yin, 2014). Carrying out internal checks on the quality of the data and its interpretation ensure that the research is as robust as possible (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Additionally, providing information on the research process provides reassurance to the reader.

### **3.23. Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how the concepts of Bourdieu are used in the study. It proceeded to a short discussion on the epistemological and ontological outlook which guided the research. It contains a detailed account of the research process from the design to data collection through to the data analysis stage. The relevant ethical considerations were also discussed. Chapter four follows with a presentation of the research findings.

## **Chapter 4 Findings**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the narrative of the findings of the study which offers new insights into low SES students' engagement with the extracurricular activities offered in university. While previous studies tended to focus on the barriers and challenges faced by such students to engagement (Christie, Munro and Wager, 2005; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Purcell *et al.*, 2012; Devlin and McKay, 2014; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016), this study is distinct as its focus on students who have successfully engaged while in university. They also graduated with a credit-bearing extracurricular module and succeeded in securing meaningful employment post-graduation. These students represent Bourdieu's and Passeron's (2000) exceptions that prove the rule. Moreover, a further aspect of this research is the inclusion of the views of staff who interact with low SES students daily and see first-hand the complexities and ambiguities faced by students operating daily in a socio-culturally incongruous environment (McKay and Devlin, 2014).

In a classic single-case study, according to Yin (2009), the format for writing the case study report involves the use of a single narrative that describes and analyses the case and presents the findings with the support of empirical evidence. The narrative may be supplemented with "tabular as well as graphic and pictorial displays" and must be composed in an engaging manner (Yin, 2009, p.170). This study presents the narrative under four distinct headings that are then further sub-divided into various sub-headings. The narratives are interpreted with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, making use of the conceptual tools of habitus and field, as well as economic, social and cultural capital. Numerous and, at times, extensive quotations from the participants of the study are used throughout, keeping their experiences in the foreground and acknowledging the importance of their voices. In a case study, one should be able to "hear the sound of voices" (Thomas, 2011, p.7).

The headings are derived from a qualitative coding of three sources: the interview transcripts, the assignments submitted for the Uaneen Module and a small number of information sheets submitted in advance of conducting the interviews. The findings are generated by coding

what Yin (2009, p.128) describes as ‘study outputs’ systematically through NVivo, by aggregating the findings and by returning to the case study data for iterative explanation building. Themes resulted from the data analysis, and these were then scrutinised further for meaningful patterns. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that there are no hard and fast rules about what makes a theme, and interpretive judgement was used to categorise them into relevant sections. These sections, incorporating the themes, are drawn together and presented in a narrative case study report. The report is illuminative rather than generalizable, due to the small sample size. However, as Yin (2014) and Stake (1994) contest, a sense of naturalistic generalisation operates throughout case studies whereby the reader is sufficiently informed about the case to make judgements about the extent to which findings apply to other cases. The thick description offered will support such reader generalisation. Evidence is presented by including a selection of quotes.

This section introduces the participants and provides relevant context material to the readership about their backgrounds. It is concerned with participants’ pre-DCU life, and it focuses on exploring their motivation to attend university, and more specifically, why they chose to attend DCU. The report proceeds to consider various aspects of the DCU journey and explores these under several themes as they emerge during the data analysis phase. The section concludes by presenting some significant insights into their lives post-graduation.

*Table 4.1 List of main themes and corresponding sub-themes*

<b>Main themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Expectations, motivations and desires	Background and heritage Paths to DCU Role of school and teachers
Settling and surviving.	Access Department supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial</li> <li>- Academic</li> <li>- Social and emotional</li> </ul> Grit and resilience
Engaging and developing	Barriers to participation

	Gaining skills and building confidence Uaneen Module
Creating capital.	Friendships and networks Making connections Further Education Career

## **4.2. Theme: Motivations, expectations and desires**

### **4.2.1. Background and heritage**

This opening section exposes the early motivations and expectations of the participants and outlines the hopes and desires they possessed before they entered Dublin City University. Far from being a homogenous group, the nine graduates in this study hail from a variety of backgrounds and each brought their unique characteristics to Dublin City University. Just two are from Dublin, specifically from areas local to the University. Two others are from urban areas outside Dublin, and the remainder comes from rural areas. Only one has a farming connection, and her parents combine running a small farm with off-farm employment. The parents of other participants were employed in semi-skilled or manual work. Some were unemployed. What unites the families is the fact that the participants, as young third level prospects, all qualified for the Dublin City University Access programme through a combination of income level criteria and at least two other socio-economic factors that deemed them eligible for entry through this route. Viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, all the participants had low reserves of economic capital and any social capital they possessed would most likely not serve them well in their new environment. It could be argued that a small number were in possession of at least some cultural capital, generated by their interest and activities at secondary school such as drama and debate. In spite of this, it is reasonable to assert that they arrived into the university setting possessing habitus that differed significantly to that of middle-class students (Bourdieu, 1984). All but one were “first-generation students”, defined here as students whose parents did not hold a degree, although there are conflicting interpretations about what this may mean. The term “first-generation”

is often taken to imply a possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary to succeed at college on the basis that their parents had not previously attended. In the United States of America, in particular, the label comes with assumptions that involve the parents' lack of experience in navigating the academic, financial and cultural barriers to higher education (Sharpe, 2017). Despite their lack of intimate knowledge of the field of HE, parents who value education and have invested time and resources into their offspring's education can be an essential source of support (Reay, 2005; Gofen, 2009). One participant in this study confirmed that her mother held a Degree, but she did not indicate in any way how this contributed to her experience of university. She did allude, however, to the fact that both her parents had mental health issues that appeared to have impacted upon her. The group were graduates of programmes in media, law, business and education. There were no representatives from science, engineering or computing, perhaps reflecting the low take-up of the Uaneen Module by students in these disciplines. The non-contributory status of the module may in part explain the lack of representation from these programmes.

#### **4.2.2. Paths to DCU**

In addition to a diversity of backgrounds, the participants also had differing paths to third-level education. Some were on track to pursue further education from an early age, and a sense of a personal desire to succeed was described. On such potentially fertile ground, the seed of success germinated as they could visualise a life beyond their immediate sphere and could anticipate something more ambitious, more exciting and more alluring on the horizon. It required a shift in self-concept and an ability to see education and work possibilities beyond that horizon that did not exist in their immediate context (Biggeri, 2007). For others, the path was more serendipitous or circumstantial, and arguably, as they describe in their own words, they had to fight a little harder to make it.

*I had some crap jobs growing up, you need a bit of that too, and you need a bit of that. You need crap jobs to see that you do not want to do that long term (LL14).*

*It was definitely a case of seeing people around doing stuff I did not want to do. Tommy Tiernan said that you get blisters pointing, so I definitely wanted something a little more exciting than manual work (GB08).*

#### **4.2.3. Role of school and teachers**

All of the participants, except one, came through the Irish Department of Education and Skills Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) school system. Launched in May 2005, the DEIS system remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. It provides for a standardised system for identifying levels of disadvantage and an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) and focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from preschool through second-level education. In the school year 2016/17 there were 825 schools included in the programme, of which one hundred and eighty-five were second-level school (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a).

Such schools promote awareness of university access programmes even from primary school level. At secondary school, career guidance teachers operate in a pivotal role to promote access to third-level education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Acting as mentors, they encourage and provide essential information about accessing university courses (Speigler and Bernarek, 2013). One participant believed that he had first heard about accessing the university experience through the grapevine while in a Further Education College, indicating the importance of such ‘hot knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998). His situation highlights the importance of appropriate and timely career advice, particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Reay, David and Ball (2005) suggest that this is one key aspect of institutional habitus, which impacts directly on students’ higher education destinations with differing institutional habitus transforming into different advice. There is no evidence in this study that participants availed of private career advice, as is often the case among more affluent students and students from middle-class backgrounds.

*Even though neither of my parents went to University, there was always an assumption that the kids would go to University, so it was very much assumed. I do not think there was ever a decision made, and it was very much - you are going to university (GB08).*



*I would say the idea of coming to University was always on the table because I performed well in school, at primary school and secondary school, and I did quite well in exams. I didn't feel pressure or anything, but I felt like university was a kind of a natural extension (DM08).*

*While my parents were only educated to second level, it was generally very much in our path while in secondary school that you would be going to third level, whether locally or to a national university (JS07).*

Although with one noted exception in this study, none of the parents of the participant cohort had been to third-level education, some participants had followed in the footsteps of older siblings to either college or university.

*My sister did like a PLC and then my middle brother in the family - he went to study engineering in DKIT. He dropped it and then my next brother did a business degree in DKIT, so I was the first to come to university, particularly (DM08).*

*So I am the youngest of four siblings. All of my siblings went to third level. They all went to institutes; Sligo I.T.; Athlone and St. Angela's for nursing. So I guess I was the first one to venture to Dublin to school and to go to a university per se (MM08).*

*So, I was first generation going to University, though my two sisters had gone to University before me (JS07).*

In one case, it appears that the participant has paved the way not only for his success but for his siblings and interestingly for his parents also. There is evidence perhaps of the “ripples of hope” effect (Share and Carroll, 2013) whereby each access student influences others in their family and community and inspires them to achieve. They provide an understanding of the habitus of the university and ripples of learning flow both from and between the institution and the home (O’Shea, 2015).

*I was the first one in the family to go to college, but since then, there has been a few of them who has went (sic), so it's good that way. The brother, he went back to do something with computing, he has nearly finished the course. My Father has went (sic) back and done pharmaceuticals. He's finished his Masters now. My Mother*

*went back and did childcare, and she is working in a school now, so they are all back (LL14).*

This ripple effect is also in evidence with the transfer of expectations to the next generation. One participant, who is a parent, spoke passionately about how his twelve-year-old daughter is ambitious and how higher education is already part of her habitus and lexicon. The silence around attending university has been broken (O'Shea, 2015), bringing with it new perspectives around educational participation for future generations.

*That is the way my daughter is now as well, of course, I will be going to college, she has the idea of a career plan, and she is only 12, she has a couple of options, I might do this, I might do this, yes university is absolutely on the cards, it really is (NC10).*

He is proud of the fact that, unlike him, she will not be a first-generation student and that he will be in a position to provide her with the cultural capital required to navigate higher education.

*No she won't (be first generation) and that is something I'm quite proud of like and she will have the support as I have been through the system, and hopefully she will make it through as well (NC10).*

One participant, though personally highly motivated, did not have such an easy path and unlike the graduates above, he did not have the support and encouragement of his parents nor the advantage of siblings who had served as role models to smooth the way in advance.

*It would have always been on the agenda for me, for me personally anyway. But that said, my parents were the opposite. My parents never thought that we would go to third-level education after we finished. They thought that we would go to work straight into the workplace, so there were no college funds available (RK15).*

Motivated and ambitious, this graduate acting in a strongly agentic way had to be proactive and resourceful in order to fulfil his desire to attend Dublin City University without the financial or emotional backing of his parents.

*I always had an idea in the back of my mind that I had that ambition, so that is why I worked since I was 16 right up to second year in college to be able to pay for it. The encouragement wasn't there by my parents. The attitude of my parents was that when you are 18 years of age, that is it, and off you go (RK15).*

It would appear that even in an encouraging or neutral home environment, self-determination is critical when students have to meet the aspiration by themselves and especially when parents do not have the knowledge to offer meaningful advice on navigating the system based on prior experience.

For two of the participants, university or indeed any further education was not on their radar when they left secondary school. This was arguably attributable to family circumstances, combined with a lack of expectation that a university education was an option and mainly due to a lack of role models in their immediate family, '*Not in my immediate family, in my immediate friends, nothing, and nobody*' (NC10).

A customer provided the spark that ignited the desire and the motivation in this particular student to pursue further education in the shop where he worked part-time:

*No, just saying that that was my job for life then and that I was a lifer in (... named shop) and I said absolutely not (NC10).*

The comment, combined with the encouragement of significant adults from outside of the sphere of immediate family and friends, encouraged him to seek out opportunities to gain a qualification. Fatherhood provided further motivation for him.

*I was very involved in various youth groups when I was growing up, so I did have people, not family members, saying that maybe I should consider doing something other than (... named shop ...) (NC10).*

*At the age of nineteen, my life changed when I became a father and was introduced with a bang to the world of parenting and being responsible for another life. It was*

*then I realised my life needed to have meaning and that working in a petrol station would not make my daughter proud. It made me realise that I had to re-enter education, and that is what I did (NC10 - extract from Uaneen Portfolio).*

This participant eventually found a route to DCU through further education rather than through the more conventional path of the Leaving Certificate examination points system. Another participant reported circumstances whereby his Mother had been extremely young when he was born, she did not feature much in his upbringing and instead his grandparents raised him.

*So I kind of naturally grew up with my grandparents ... It was a funny context, as they were not really my parents. If you are adopted, you are fully adopted, whereas I was kind of half adopted and kind of half not adopted if you know what I mean? So that is the context, and that is still to this day the way it is (AC11).*

His talent as an athlete was to prove his route in or at least to be the catalyst that ignited his interest in a university journey. On leaving school, while double-jobbing earning money from sport and from working in his grandfather's plumbing business, he was offered a place in another third-level institution to study and play sport. For various reasons, this did not prove successful, and he transferred instead to the Access Programme in DCU. The transfer was not without its problems, and he explains that the decision to take the university place was not a straightforward one as there was some resistance from his grandparents.

*The conversations I had to have at home were based around the practicalities of feeding myself, funding myself, you know this next five years, rather than plumbing, which was really really booming at the time (AC11).*

*I think among people of my grandparents' generation, there is scepticism about education over paying work. It was a challenge for me to go to college as it was non-paying (AC11-extract from pre-interview information).*

In spite of such circumstances and in spite of the attitudes and lack of encouragement from those around him, this particular student persisted with his ambition and commenced a three-degree programme in DCU.

### **4.3. Theme: Settling and surviving**

#### **4.3.1. The support of the Access Department**

Compared to students from affluent and educated families who display high levels of comfort and ease when navigating the system (Bourdieu, 1996), for some in this study, the struggle was real and palpable. For the participants, the Access Department, and its accompanying supports, was critical to their survival and continued engagement.

*I used to look around and see people with these nice clothes and iPhones, and they did not work at the weekends. In second year, as well, I was mad about this idea of working to pay to go through college and it was a little bit frustrating seeing people who did not work, yet had better resources than I did (RK15).*

All of the participants in this study cite the supports offered by the DCU Access Department as being significant in their DCU journey, financially, emotionally and socially. It is worth noting from an analysis of the data that the HEAR scheme and the DCU Access Programme appear at times to be viewed as the same entity by the participants and this is reflected in their direct quotes. It is also worth noting that even in the absence of such schemes and programmes, the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) (City of Dublin Education and Training Board, 2019) grants would still be available to them. SUSI is Ireland's single national awarding authority for all higher and further education grants and funding to eligible students in approved full-time third-level education in Ireland and also, in some cases, funding for students studying outside the State. Eligibility is determined by family income and size, distance from the HEI and number of children in further or higher education. Grants are on a sliding scale depending on eligibility. The highest maintenance grant payment is currently just over €3,000 per annum, where the qualifying student is from a family with less than four dependent children. This only applies to a family earning less than €40,000 per annum. Little wonder, therefore, that all of the participants interviewed acknowledge the value of the DCU Access Programme in providing additional specific supports.

For some, there was a strong sense that it was the sole reason that they were in a position to attend university and that without these programmes they would never have made it into, or sometimes through, university (Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017).

*Access is the sole reason I am attending university, and it has helped me immensely in both financial and personal problems throughout my time in DCU (NC10- Extract from Uaneen portfolio).*

*It wouldn't have happened without the Access Programme (RK15).*

#### **4.3.1.1. Financial Supports**

Others, although destined for university and motivated to get there through the support of a family network, were relieved by the additional financial support provided to them.

*When I came closer to university with a bit more question or not so much the points or the qualification but more so about funding it. I guess given how I was performing it (Access Programme) was positioned more as a financial tool (DM08).*

*I knew I needed the Access Programme, especially from the funding perspective (AC11).*

*It certainly made life an awful lot easier in College, that's absolutely sure. I think in terms of helping with extra-curricular activity it definitely would have helped, given you space and time to do that and maybe some of the benefits of it in terms of being able to stay in Dublin financially would have assisted towards extra-curricular (JS07).*

*And so basically you know, we didn't, we weren't that financially secure (MM07).*

*I was working towards the academic level, so it was definitely from a financial point. Of course, it was a good relief for my parents to have that support there (GB08).*

#### **4.3.1.2. Academic Supports**

The academic support provided by the DCU Access Programme begins even before students enter the university. Significantly, places are offered to DCU Access students by reducing entry-level points based on the State's Leaving Certificate Examination results. This allows access students to gain entry to courses with up to 30-35 points less than the general cohort. It is also a recognition of the fact that the playing field is not altogether level for students across the social strata that due to scarce economic capital lower socioeconomic groups do not benefit from academic advantages such as private grinds, and examination coaching that more privileged students might afford.

#### **4.3.1.3. Reduced points**

The opportunity to enter DCU on reduced points was an important aspect of the access route for some participants. Others, because of their academic ability, did not need to avail of this concession. Two of the participants in the study entered university through further education, and therefore the demands of the transfer routes through the Leaving Certificate Examination points system were not a factor.

*I definitely was, I believe I was, maybe like 30 points short I'm going to say for communications, but still, again I was lucky enough to get accepted through the Access programme (MM08).*

*I think that I was maybe 35 points short ... The course I ended up doing here was my dream course if you like and certainly, the reduced points did help me (JS07).*

*The actual points for my course that year were 420, but I got in with 400 (RK15).*

*No, because I came in through the Further Education college and I came in that way – transferred (NC10).*

Of note, however, is the fact that they were all aware of the facility and in at least one instance, the graduate viewed it as a significant feature of the programme. It may, in essence, serve as

a security net or reassurance for students applying to university who fear that a particular course is beyond their reach.

*I thought I would (have to use the reduced points), but I didn't have to in the end. That was one of the reasons for doing it, but I didn't have to in the end (MM14).*

#### **4.3.1.4. Grinds and additional classes**

Additional academic support is an important component of the Access Programme, which is offered to students who may have difficulties with one or more aspects of their course. It did not feature prominently in the academic journey of many of the participants, though some did refer to the help it provided. It appears that a majority of the participants was academically skilled and contributed in many ways to the university community, but they needed support in navigating the tangled web of policies and procedures, as well as the particular lexicon associated with them.

*But what I did get a lot of help with was a Maths' module, even though I had done honours Maths for the Leaving, I still needed help with the particular Maths in the course and access actually put on a Maths course separate and that did help, and I think a couple of us in the course had to avail of that. It kept us going, and I ended up getting a high enough grade in that (JS07).*

#### **4.3.1.5. Opportunity for internships and mentoring**

Opportunities to avail of designated internships and mentorship programmes were highlighted as significant for many of the participants. It offered an introduction for them to companies that otherwise would have been outside of their experience or personal orbit, as they did not enjoy the benefits of an extensive social network.

*I also did two internships. I forgot to mention them. I am all over the place. Both helped by the Access Programme to get them. I went to Eversheds in my second*



*year, and then I went to Matheson in my third year, and they were both helped by Access to actually get into those programmes (LL14).*

*In year three there was the eBay mentorship programme, and they only took on Access students from a range of universities, but no bursary. In 3rd year an email came through about a Google Mentorship programme, so I looked into that, applied and was accepted. And that had a knock-on effect because, in the Summer, I had an interview for an entry-level position with Google (RK15).*

Though the participants did not express it verbally as such, their body cues, the tone of the speech and other interpersonal dimensions noted in the interviews indicate that they were acutely aware that they did not, at that stage, possess the social capital necessary to leverage access to such opportunities. They could, however, identify others among their peer group who had such capital in abundance and who were in a position to use it.

*I did my internship and there were 25 of us. Two of us weren't related to someone in the company ... two out of 25. I thought 'that's ludicrous' (LL14).*

*There are some people, for example, one person I was in a group within final year, and he got the job because his father's mate or someone was on the Board and that really annoyed me (RK 15).*

#### **4.3.1.6. Social and emotional supports**

Potentially one of the most critical supports the Access Programme offers is social and emotional support. Bourdieu (1990) highlights that students from lower SES backgrounds typically arrive in university “not knowing the rules of the game”, whereas those students from wealthier middle-class backgrounds with relevant cultural capital are assured in this field. This lack of cultural capital makes the access students’ transition to HE difficult as they are not aware of the “rules of the game”, there is a lack of familiarity with the peculiarities of university life and expectations of them as students. Consequently, they are playing catch up compared with their peers who have the relevant cultural and social capital at their disposal. The early induction course delivered by the Access Department before the entire student body returns attempts to address this.

Each year this three-day orientation programme is delivered to students, entering via the access route before semester one begins. It aims to prepare students socially and academically for undergraduate life while familiarizing them with the campus. Additionally, it provides them with an opportunity to get to know the staff in the Access Department who will support them throughout their time at university. With current DCU access students acting as leaders for the duration of the programme, incoming students are divided into “streams” according to their subject group. As well as sample lectures and workshops on study and presentation skills, there is an emphasis on sports and social events as part of the agenda.

Each of the participants identified this short, but intensive orientation programme as being of paramount importance. The participants highlight two aspects in particular. Firstly, they commented on the importance of building friendships with others in the early access group. Secondly, becoming acquainted with the university landscape and geography, before the entire student population returned to campus for classes, was reported as being a significant help in settling into the new surroundings. Phrases such as “*getting to know the lie of the land*” (DM08) “*finding your bearings*” (GB08) and “*getting integrated*” (LL14) perfectly sum up the value of the programme to those who went through it. It offered them the opportunity to meet with other students from different disciplines, form networks and in some instances, to make lifelong friendships. By giving them what they describe as a jump-start on the rest of the student body, it did in effect help them to acquire initial and valuable social currency.

*I did the two-week Summer - before college starts back thing - that was great because it meant that going into Orientation Week, you almost felt like a returning student, you felt like ... nice ... you had a core group immediately that were going through the same thing- it was cool, I really liked that (GB08).*

*That was where having that first week was so beneficial, just like to have the lie of the land in that first week and have acquaintances, and I think it is important to have acquaintances across all disciplines as well, so that was really helpful (DM08).*

*And then I got in. It was so exciting. I have such vivid memories of coming in, and you know through the avenue entrance to DCU with my Dunnes suitcase for the summer. You know, that pre Summer thing that we did. You know, I met friends in there that are still some of my best friends, two women in particular. I made lots of friends but those two, in particular, happened to be in my class and I just really felt like I had won the lottery (MM08).*

*Yeah, yeah, it was great in that sense. Okay. Having support, going in when you started. I think that's what was good about it. Like if I didn't know anybody. You know I've met all of these people on this access thing. So we were kinda, you know, that's what was group therapy for me. Yeah yeah (MM14).*

*I think that week that people get here, just the Access students, that's an amazing week. I came here, and before my actual first day in DCU, I knew loads of people, which was amazing. To actually get a week when not everyone is here, and there is a bit more focus on helping people get integrated rather than just jumping in on day one. Definitely a good week, you get more of a chance to integrate yourself into, find your way around, and everything is not so challenging (LL14).*

*But that week I think really cemented real friendships from across a lot of different disciplines in the Access Programme. So if you seen (sic) someone in DCU throughout my time in DCU you would just say - "ah Access", so that way we knew each other from that network, so that way I ended up with a huge support network and there just happened to be two people with me in Access who did my course so that helped enormously and I remain friends with both of them (NC10).*

*The first time I was ever on campus was for the Access orientation. Some of my closest friends to this day were people I met at orientation. We went on to live together and visit each other's family homes. We still keep in touch even though we're all in different countries, etc. (MM14. Extract from pre-interview information).*

Participation in programmes such as the DCU Access Programme aims to develop cultural and social capital constructs in areas such as information, network and trust-building. They also contribute to fostering a strong sense of autonomy and independence in the student body (Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017). This programme appears to have served the participants well in their first weeks of the semester. Participation in the programme seemed

to alleviate some of the anxieties and fears typically experienced by lower socioeconomic students (SES) students; those typically who may not possess the same cultural, social and economic capital as middle-class students (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). In many ways, the work of the Access department is designed to provide a roadmap for students whose parents or significant family members may not have been to university and who consequently cannot offer them advice, guidelines or even tips for being successful. Students in these circumstances typically have no reservoir of cultural and social resources (Margolis *et al.*, 2001) to draw upon. First-generation or low SES students in other Irish institutions avail of similar programmes and they are intended to assist incoming students in mastering what Jackson (1968) once significantly referred to as the “hidden curriculum” of higher education. Some elite American universities likewise promote the value of these courses, and one, Georgetown University, makes particular reference to the role of its Community Scholars Program in the acquisition of the cultural capital required to “weave students into the cultural life of Georgetown” (Georgetown University, 2019).

During the DCU orientation programme, incoming students become familiar with the university staff from the Access Department, those who will support them as they proceed through the coming years. All first-year students are assigned a designated Support Officer that they meet early in the first semester. This initial meeting provides students with an opportunity to raise any concerns that they may have in order for the Support Officers to offer practical and relevant assistance. Additionally, students are contacted throughout the year, particularly around exam periods, to ensure that individual supports are availed of. Participants in this study reported, similar to those in Hannon, Faas and O’Sullivan (2017) that the provision of information served to reduce their fears and opened up a world previously relatively unknown to them. Although not the entire study cohort availed of the supports throughout their time in DCU, some remained in regular contact and continued to benefit from their relationship with the programme and with the staff for the duration of their degree.

*What Access did for me was an awful lot of insulation. Would I have made it anyway? Quite possibly, but it did add that layer of insulation, that ensured that I did get through it (JS07).*

*Access was a great help, and I don't think I availed of any other support networks until final year when I saw a college counsellor to help deal with final year stress (MM14).*

*I definitely don't think that I would have been able to do as well as I did or cope as well as I did without the support of access, and that's the truth (NC10).*

#### **4.3.2. Beyond grit and resilience and towards agency.**

Some of the participants highlight characteristics that they believe access students share in common and that have contributed to their ability to successfully navigate their DCU journey and beyond. The effort and persistence required by one participant to get to DCU have previously been highlighted. One of the factors that can determine the success of first-generation, as well as other, university students is “grit” (Reed and Jeremiah, 2017). Common synonyms might include “tenacity”, “persistence”, “resilience”, “stamina”, and “perseverance”. Duckworth (2013; 2016), who has authored and co-authored (Duckworth *et al*, 2007, Duckworth and Quinn, 2009) research on this topic, combines these qualities into the term “grit” and examines how it impacts on various aspect of human behaviour and interactions and the extent to which it is a predictor of achievement. Defining grit as passion and perseverance for long-term goals, which give meaning to almost all activity, she has devised a grit scale and outlined four psychological aspects of grit: interest, practice, purpose and hope. It combines resilience, ambition, and self-control in the pursuit of goals that typically take months, years or even decades to achieve. These characteristics, wedded to hard and sustained work, are formidable (Reed and Jeremiah, 2017). Of relevance to this study is the contention that participation in structured, challenging, yet enjoyable extracurricular activities can foster grit (Duckworth, 2016). She cites a Harvard University admissions officer who extols the virtues of involvement in extracurricular activities. The transferability of the hard work, singular energy and the discipline required in ECAs to other aspects of life is recognised and rewarded. The participants in this study clearly and

undoubtedly displayed evidence of grit and determination in both their personal, social and academic lives. Significantly, they recognised the qualities in themselves and in others from similar backgrounds and circumstances who also succeeded.

*There is a subconscious feeling about people on the Access programme; you know that they are going to work hard or harder or that they are going to appreciate it more than those to whom it is just given to. I think Access students have a different mindset and a different experience (RK15).*

*So I think as well when you come from a modest background there's almost more of that ... you have more grit almost because you didn't go through a certain school system. It was all about your reputation. And it was all about your ability to prove your worth (MM07).*

*The people that I was friendly with that didn't really have the situation as easy in front of them ... they tend to work a lot harder and actually progress in a different way. I think to accelerate slightly differently and more effectively really (LL14).*

*I think that there is a huge resilience there. Obviously, I would have met friends who were not Access students, but you could be guaranteed that when you walked into the library that you would see a hell of a lot more people from the Access service working as hard as they could on their courses compared to maybe people who didn't have to fight so hard to get into university (NC10).*

Addressing their motivation and continued engagement, the participants identified how they believed grit and resilience contributed to their successful entry to and subsequent navigation of what was, at times, an unfamiliar university landscape. As indicated, throughout their accounts, there is evidence that they recognise their possession of resilience, determination, perseverance and tenacity and that this is a factor in both their initial and continued engagement.

Additionally, qualities and traits such as prudence, thriftiness, resourcefulness and resilience are characteristics which served the study cohort exceptionally well, and throughout the participants' accounts, there are glimpses of such qualities in their familial habitus.

*And again, you know as I mentioned, my mother has always been incredibly savvy, from a financial perspective. She continues to be very resourceful, so you know, anyway that she could make money, she would do it. I think I kind of got some of that too (MM07).*

*My Grandparents were very hardworking, and my Granny is, how do you say it, prudent and thrifty, she would have made a great financial controller, not that she is scabby in any way, but they have never lived beyond their means, typical kind of old people (AC11).*

An insight from the director of a university access programme describes how their outreach programmes encourage pupils to reflect on their own experiences and their habitus, to recognise the value therein and to reframe them positively.

*However, in the process of working with us on all of the outreach programs and being on the foundation course, we would try to get them to reframe their understanding of what social-cultural capital is anyway because a lot of the literature talks about it almost as a kind of a deficit. It frames this as a deficit, and you know they have much of what you would call community cultural wealth as well. Because, what gets them through and makes them creative people in this kind of environment are things like self-motivation, resilience, agility, flexibility, originality, lots of facets that arise from having been in circumstances where they always have to navigate unknown terrain and where they have had to overcome significant adversity. So, we try to say these are all your assets you know*

These qualities, particularly resilience and an ability to cope with adversity, are similarly highlighted in Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) study of nine working-class students in an elite university.

Some researchers, however, have taken exception to the contention that grit alone can overcome adversity. They suggest that an over-reliance on student resilience, persistence, tenacity, persistence or "grit" masks more fundamental and institutional biases, which impede equality of opportunity (Bazeliass, Lemay and Doleck, 2016; Finnegan, 2017). The contention that students succeed purely due to the possession of grit ignores the serious

barriers, which hinder progress, and oversimplifies the circumstances required for students to achieve (Kundu, 2017). Kundu (2017, p.68) believes that success requires not only grit but also agency and suggests, “That interplay between personal agency and a supportive social structure is necessary for students to navigate barriers towards academic and professional success”. Although his research is US-centric and focuses mainly on high school students, it resonates with other research, which calls for an increased emphasis on agency to conceptualise the resilience of students from non-traditional or less privileged backgrounds (Clegg, 2011). It also resonates with claims that providing a young person with agency supports their capability to aspire (Walker, 2008; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Similarly, Hannon’s *et al.* (2017) research provides evidence of the value of a capability approach to widening participation. Overall the research points very strongly to the importance of students’ resilience and agency (Luckett and Luckett, 2009; Finnegan, Fleming and Thunborg, 2014; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016) in enabling them to traverse the sometimes-difficult terrain of their HEI.

Agency, unlike grit, does not ignore or gloss over how structural inequalities can create obstacles; instead, it refers to the power people have to think for themselves, influence one’s functioning and actions in ways that shape their experiences in life towards something they desire (Kundu, 2017; Bandura, 2018). Though they may not have articulated it in their interviews, preferring instead to term it grit or resilience, the successful graduate cohort in this study displayed agency by consciously and deliberately engaging with extracurricular activities, selected in terms of their life concerns and interests (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Stepping back to their pre-DCU days, they also “played agentially” (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013, p.131) by securing a place in the first instance- habitus at its most agentic (Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

#### **4.4. Theme: Engaging and Developing**

##### **4.4.1. Engaging with Extracurricular Activities**



Without exception, the participants reported that they had been involved in some form of extra-curricular activity before beginning their studies in DCU. These include sports, drama, debate, politics and volunteering. It is perhaps not surprising that they vigorously and enthusiastically embraced all that was on offer in these areas of interest while attending DCU. One graduate attributes her decision to attend DCU to the activities of one society: The Media Production Society.

*I chose DCU because I had read about one of the societies in the local paper and was inspired to get involved. I had been to a DCU open day earlier in the year and wasn't impressed by the campus, so I wrote it off originally. But my mind was changed when I read about a fundraiser that the media society holds every year (MM14- extract from the pre-interview schedule).*

Many of the participants continued with established interests and joined the relevant club or society in DCU. Others viewed it as an opportunity to experiment and to try an activity or interest not previously available to them.

*Urban Artz didn't exist where I came from, so it was great. I met all sorts of different people, different years, and different courses. You need to throw your hand at all sorts of things. You don't know if you like it or not unless you try it (LL14).*

Of the group studied, it was found that almost all were involved in more than one of the campus activities or areas of interest, but they generally had leadership or other significant roles in only one. Interest in sport varied considerably also. One participant had no involvement in sport at all while another was both a player and an administrator, to the exclusion of any other interests. Some participants embraced elements of social responsibility and served as class representatives. Significantly, two were elected officers in the Students' Union. Overall, for a group of students who arrived relatively unprepared for university life and deplete of significant aspects of social capital in a sense, they adapted well and demonstrated a considerable variety in their sphere of interests.

*So, ultimately, I joined a good few Clubs, and Socs from the get-go (JS07).*

*So I got involved with Debate Soc at the start and then slowly became involved with College View and writing and kind of touching a few different societies (DM08).*

#### **4.4.1.1. Barriers to participation**

It appears that the study cohort experienced minimal barriers to participation in activities in which they choose to engage. The fee for students to join Clubs and Societies in DCU is minimal at only four euro per academic year. Subsidies are also provided to clubs by the university body to ensure that many of the activities are affordable for students at little or no extra cost. One participant commented, “by no means was I wealthy at that time, but I could afford that much” (LL14).

*I think the societies were probably subsidised by the Office of Student Life. That always helped, so the trip away was never breaking the bank, and an event was most likely to be two euro on the door or something. So all of those amounts were negligible (DM08).*

*Financially no, as the joining fee is so nominal, it is almost like a contribution to stop people signing up to everything (GB08).*

*To actually get involved and going away on trips, you know, whether it be to Conferences or Intervarsity’s because they were subsidised. Your path was there, and you were always able to go (JS07).*

Though they allude to the impact part-time work had on their involvement, despite this, they persevered and were successful.

*I did work part-time weekend as well, so in terms of that kind of supporting myself and being away that I still had to make money, it wasn’t like when I got in and got the grant that I felt that I was on the home straight, I still had to pay my way and juggle that with the extracurricular activities (DM08).*

*I was relying on the grant, and I worked in a pizza place to get some money, but if the trips and stuff were more expensive, I could not have done them (LL14).*

*As I mentioned before I did work part-time back home, so I was going home every weekend to work, and I struggled because as I said before, I self-funded all the way through college. So my parents never gave me money as a handout or anything like that, so everything was self-funded (RK15).*

*I was financially ok, I had my grant, I had access, and I worked every weekend. (MM07).*

*I worked there part-time all the time I was studying (NC10).*

Participants appeared to value the fact that activities and trips away were subsidised, thereby removing possibly the most significant barrier to involvement. These subsidies are provided by the University's Office of Student Life from a portion of each student's registration fee.

*I think the Office of Student Life probably subsidised the societies and that always helped, the trip away was never breaking the bank and the event was most likely to be two euro on the door or something, so all of those amounts were negligible (DM08).*

*Socially there was no problem, but financially, you can join a Club or Society for three or four euro and by no means was I wealthy at that time, but I could afford that much (LL14).*

*To actually get involved and go away on trips, you know whether it be to Conferences or Intervarsity's because they were subsidised your path was there, and you were always able to go (JS07).*

Some participants did mention time constraints, but this would be in line with any group of students who are studying, working part-time and who are involved in extra or co-curricular activities: *"The main barrier is always time constraints". (MM14) "I don't*

*remember that being an issue. I can't remember. I just remember it was more so about time pressures” (DM08).*

One participant was constrained by family commitments and found it difficult to get involved in campus-based activities and concentrated his efforts instead on a local youth group. *“I would have socialised a little bit here but then the commitments of having a very young baby ... I would have had to have been at home quite a lot” (NC10).*

Although by definition, as Uaneen Module graduates, all participants intensively engaged with an extracurricular activity, there was a perception amongst some participants that certain activities or societies were not for them. This is similar to the findings of Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) who highlighted students in their comparative study who were not involved in certain ECAs as they sensed class differences between themselves and members of the society. Bourdieu (1977) was early to recognise the importance of sport with respect to the accumulation and display of cultural capital, and an obvious aspect of sports and class is apparent in those requiring a high degree of economic capital to master or even participate in. Bourdieu found that the French working class were less likely to play golf or tennis and or to go skiing than the more privileged classes, as these activities require substantially more economic and social capital.

*But by second year I had sussed out what societies people were associated with. So, what I found was that you have people who are from well-to-do backgrounds or they don't work at the weekends. So they can judge them, those people who were joining ESoc, AandF Soc and Snowboarding. These people were going on snowboarding trips after semester one exams when I was working four days to try and pick up an extra couple of shifts (RK15).*

*The reason I wouldn't have joined Accounting and Finance or any of those, they have a culture you know. ... That culture is made up of a lot of different things, their activities or skiing trips are ... access students can't afford that, and that's where the divide happens (AC11).*

#### 4.4.2. Gaining skills and building confidence

All of the participants articulated that their involvement in extracurricular activities was of enormous benefit to them. They were in a position to identify and reflect on how the skills and competencies they gained were transferable to their post-graduation lives. They were adept at distinguishing these from their course work and at identifying the advantages it conferred upon them.

*Student Life in DCU has provided me with skills and experiences that my course never could (GB08-Extract from Uaneen Portfolio).*

*And I think you know, thinking about my extracurricular being in the drama society, working for the college paper... like everything that I did absolutely had such a tremendous positive impact on what I've done throughout my career, from the skills, you know, from my writing skills, from my presenting skills (MM07).*

*So I think that it is worth noting that within DCU club and Society life it operates in a strong professional system. So like, the way in which you have to... um... if you're sitting on a society committee the way you have to pitch for money and do all of those things is actually quite professional and works well as a skill set (DM08).*

*That's a good part of it, and it was a good challenge, and it kept it interesting. It was good having that role (Chair). There was lots of business-related stuff in terms of generating funds for the club and sponsorship, and it was 2007/8 at the time, so it was hard getting money off companies for football teams (AC11).*

*Post DCU, there is a lot of experience in terms of the admin work side of Clubs and Socs that I worked in which applies all the time, organising groups, for example, applies to my job (GB08).*

*When I first came to DCU, I thought that I was going back to school and would have a degree at the end of three years. Instead, I have experienced more learning outside the classroom and gained skills I didn't even know existed before my time at DCU (NC10- Extract from Uaneen Portfolio).*

Alongside the tangible skills that the participants identified in their interviews and reports, some more nebulous benefits were noted such as increased confidence and self-esteem and

the participants themselves attributed these benefits to their involvement in Uaneen module related activities.

*When I came to DCU, and I suddenly got involved with these clubs and societies, I felt like I was able to realise more of my self-worth ... (MM08).*

*Reflecting on my four years in DCU, my level of personal development is inconceivable. I am a completely different person ... for the better. (RK15- Extract from Uaneen portfolio)*

*I think the experience of Society life probably gave me the confidence to go for that position (DM08).*

*If I came in, went to class, done my assignments and left... it wouldn't have been, you know... it wouldn't have been half the experience it was... it was getting involved in the things ... and meeting new people and just getting that bit more confidence as well (LL14).*

*As I am about to end my time as a student here in DCU, I feel a much better, much more confident, more professional capable person thanks to my involvement with extracurricular life in this university (GB08: Extract from Uaneen portfolio).*

#### **4.4.3. Completing the Uaneen Module**

The participants in this study display high levels of awareness of the value of a holistic student experience, which encompasses not only academic learning but also the development of skills such as problem-solving and analysis. They also recognised their moral and emotional growth (Quinlan, 2011) and how experience from outside of the classroom and lecture theatres can contribute to other valuable outcomes (Astin, 1977; Chickering and Riesser, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Bowen, 1997). These outcomes include, but are not limited to, persistence and satisfaction as well as an increase in such areas as social competence, autonomy, confidence, self-awareness and an appreciation for human diversity. Thoughts and emotions captured in the reflective portfolios submitted at the end of their three or four-year degree programme provide evidence of their increased levels of confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness and overall persona development.

*I have grown in understanding, confidence, and competence through my work with Clubs and Societies and it is my involvement with these which have shaped me into the person I am today, and for that, I am truly grateful (GB08).*

*The most valuable thing I have achieved is overcoming my shyness. I know it is ok to talk now. And I can talk to anyone. That is thanks to society life, and it is something that will stay with me for the rest of my day's professionally and personally. I have made friends for life (MM07).*

*Did you hear about the boy who went to college with a thousand insecurities, and came out the other side feeling confident he could do absolutely anything he set his mind to? It sounds like a joke but rest assured it's not. This is how I learned to stop worrying and love campus life (DM08).*

*I am very proud of the work I have undertaken at DCU and the input and services I have helped with my participation. I heard university broadens your mind; I just didn't realise how much it would change my perception of life (NC10).*

Critically, participants reported that undertaking the DCU Uaneen Module facilitated and legitimised their reflection on and evaluation of this growth. One of the learning outcomes of the module involves developing an ability to collect and synthesise information. Students are required to create a unique learning portfolio that is self-crafted and self-directed. The aim is to demonstrate leadership and self-reliance while using an objective approach to problem-solving. The task also requires students to justify their values, their motivations and their passions to display a personal value system that aims to help create a just and democratic society. There is ample evidence from the data that participants embraced such aspirations and aims, met the requirement and displayed enormous passion and enthusiasm for the module throughout their engagement with it.

*It's evaluating and reflecting ... and you are able to see like what have I done, has this been significant ... it's not about it being enough compared to others, which is also great ... that's another good thing about Uaneen, you're not comparing yourself naturally to others because it's about your own journey (DM08).*

*I chose to do this module as I do not believe that University is simply about teaching, but rather it is about learning, both academically and socially. Throughout this project, I will detail my involvement and activities and conclude on how these have impacted and developed me (LL: Extract from Uaneen portfolio).*

*The Uaneen module for me ... it was intense as you had to record all the stuff and attend the meetings, but it was very much worth it, I think, and I would gladly do it a hundred times over. I remember we had to do a big portfolio, and I still have my portfolio (NC10).*

*When I first heard about the Uaneen module, I thought “what a great idea”. I thought it would be easy to reflect on all my extracurricular activities. However, writing this report has, at times, been very frustrating. It has been frustrating because I have such passion for society life in DCU and have such appreciation for its impact on my personal development that I find it difficult to express it strongly enough on paper (GB08 - Extract from Uaneen portfolio).*

*I started working on my Uaneen project, and I realise that this is difficult, it's a really tough one. I'd seen it as being kind of a little bit cushy and a bit like an easy way of me getting through a module and then I thought this is one of the hardest ones because that level of reflection really requires going deep. But that was so useful and such a good thing to do as it's something you don't get to do through your career (DM08-Extract from Uaneen portfolio).*

#### **4.5. Theme: Creating capital**

As previously indicated, Bourdieu (1986) identifies three categories of capital. Economic capital, which as the term suggests relates to economic resources such as money, assets and property. Social capital refers to actual and potential resources, which are, in turn, linked to the possession of a durable network of relationships. Cultural capital, which encompasses a person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills), provides an advantage in achieving a higher social-status in society. This section outlines the forms of capital which the participants identified they accrued as a result of their involvement in extracurricular activities and directly addresses the second guiding question which poses the question: What forms of capital are created through engagement in extracurricular activities within and beyond DCU?



#### 4.5.1. Friendships and networks

Significantly, the benefits accruing from involvement in university activities such as those recognised through the Uaneen module are not limited to practical and functional elements. They also include friendship building, developing a sense of belonging, creating durable present and future networks, generating a sense of personal satisfaction in giving back to others and, in no small measure, appreciating a sense of fun, passion and enthusiasm that should accompany learning. In addition to the importance of creating a network (Bourdieu, 1986) which will endure, Bourdieu (2000) acknowledges the significance of friends as a form of social capital, highlighting that they not only ease loneliness but also add to the self-worth of the person. One of the more satisfying elements of Uaneen-like activities in a university is that the scale and variety of interests, drawing from over one hundred clubs and societies in DCU for example, is geared for all-comers. In common with the students in the Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) study, some participants said that one of the positive elements of university life was meeting other people who shared their interests and aspirations. This was not always the case in school, and these shared interests became the basis for building friendships at university, as the following comment illustrates:

*I would have found that school debates were very nerdy things and very few people would have been interested in it. The thought of actually having friends and peers in debating was a great thing to be opened to me (JS07).*

*I have friends from football, from pool, even swimming, from going away on trips. I have friends who work in all big companies, who I am still close to. It makes a big difference when you know people like that (LL14).*

Most of the participants in this study referred to the fact that they made contacts through their extra-curricular activities at university; contacts that they may not otherwise have made. Akin to the traditional notion of an "old boys' network" in many ways, this reference often arises in the interview data and particularly in relation to employment and career opportunities.

*But in terms of the impact extra-curricular had on my life, it was untold. I can't imagine what my friend's base would look like now ... not to talk of the experiences, the connections I made at the time ... even in media now (JS07).*

*Yeah, I think there's a lot of people within the industry ... more people have gone through the industry who haven't had those kinds of connections in the kind of Old Boys' Club ... kind of thing ... I think I am more keen to help people on access kind of programmes (DM08).*

*I actually got a referral from LF who was in the SU a couple of years ago, and she had been on my charity trip, so that was how I met her initially ... So there is a knock-on effect there, building your network (RK15).*

*I think the kind of connections you have really matter back home, especially if you know someone who knows a producer or an editor or something like that they can just ask (MM14).*

*You are exposed to a wider group of people than you normally would. I also think that there is a sense ... and I have spoken to people in other universities also ... that if I am interviewing someone for a job, and someone has been involved in ECAs, I think that this is the kind of person ... there is a connection (GB08).*

*I'm very open to going back and asking that network of people I met here through extra-curricular for help (NC10).*

These findings are in line with previous international research on the importance of the social and relational element of university life (Tinto, 1993; Maunder, 2018; Carroll-Meehan and Howells, 2018).

In addition to the acquisition of social capital, there is evidence from the participants that they accumulated cultural capital through their involvement with a wide range of activities beyond the merely academic. In particular, they refer to the opportunity, such activities offered for affordable travel, an opportunity not always available to them prior to entering university.

*To actually get involved and going away on trips, you know whether it be to Conferences or Intervarsity's because they were subsidised you were always able to go (JS07).*

*You could go for a trip to Berlin for I think 60 euro, it's amazing what you can do with a small amount of money and I remember thinking at the time who is subsidizing this? But when you look back, you realise that it's very important that you do this (LL14).*

*Same like music society, I went to Liverpool, the Beatles trip. That was great, just ways of touching on differences, like a magazine-style collection of things, I guess you're kind of like presented of this huge amount of events and trips and then you can kind of pick and choose and then you can also decide which one to get more involved with (DM08).*

One participant, in particular, indicated that travel was not part of her familial habitus and consequently, when she got the opportunity to travel, she seized it enthusiastically.

*So I really wanted to maximise my summer you know, and I didn't really travel when I was young. You know we didn't vacation anywhere we just didn't. So once I got into college and once I started travelling a little and trying to figure out where I could travel and then still get experience and do it on the cheap as well (MM07).*

#### **4.5.2. Making connections**

Burt (2001, p.32) proposes “better-connected people enjoy higher returns”. Coleman (1988) informs us that social capital provides access to resources through network ties, making certain possible ends that would otherwise not be possible. One of the topics explored with the participants in this study was the extent to which they believed that their involvement in extracurricular activities led to an accumulation of social capital and in turn to the creation of useful networks. The participants’ provided examples of where they had brought their network into play when seeking employment or support for visa applications. These connections appear to be enduring and continue even eight to nine years later, as these participants testify, by detailing instances of how they continue to connect with their DCU network.

*Definitely, like the number of people I met here even doing simple things... once off or twice off... I would still run into them even now... fall back on them... using each other ... that kind of social network (NC10).*

*A lot of our clients are people I would know from DCU soccer... I use that network; they are senior in their business. I just think of it as names now as it has been going on for so long. It's only through reflecting on this that I realise, oh yes, how I actually know A in Dubai... We did a project with them because he was on my soccer team in DCU because I ran the Soccer Club... I used to manage some of the Leinster Senior League teams as well, so those guys are my clients now (AC11).*

This evidence highlights further the points made above about the role of extracurricular activities in creating professional networks. It appears likely that such networks are reinforced and recreated as the years progress and possibly and potentially as life-long relationships. The older graduates, in particular, have the ability to reflect on the role this has played in their lives as they advanced through their careers or businesses. The more recent graduates in the study also see the value of it, either to get a start in the post-university life or possibly to assist in other ways. One example records a visa application in which the participant paints a vivid picture of the advantage of knowing someone; over just cold calling when seeking a reference.

*So Joe's uncle is an Irish newspaper editor. Instead of cold calling him... "Oh, hi. Do you remember me from four or five years ago blah blah blah"? I just messaged Joe and asked him ..., "would your uncle mind doing this (favour)? ...and Joe was able to make the link there for me (MM14).*

#### **4.5.3. Further Education**

Referring again to the background contexts of the students who participated in this study, it is worth noting the years of graduation for their primary degrees. One graduated in 2007, three in 2008, one in 2010 and 2011, two in 2014 and the most recent one in 2015. Four of the participants embarked on studying a Master's Degree immediately on completion of their primary degree in DCU, while a further two of the cohorts did so some years later.

*I decided to do a Masters. So, I did a Masters at the London College of Fashion. The Masters was in fashion media production. It funny and kind of like serendipitous, a continuation from the kind of stuff I was doing here in fashion, in society and in media (DM08).*

*When I left DCU, I decided to do my Masters in Belfast, I initially applied to Commercial Law in Queens and got accepted into that (LL14).*

*After my degree, I went on to complete my Masters in Community Education and Social Activism, and that was in Maynooth (NC10).*

*So in the ten years since I have been in full-time employment since which obviously I have been delighted with, with only a few periods of unemployment, but two major jobs in the ten years and as I say I did my Masters in the meantime (JS07).*

#### **4.5.4. Career**

It is noteworthy that all of the participants in this study report that they successfully secured employment soon after graduation, even those who graduated in the middle of the international economic recession that began in 2008. That year began a period of what was generally considered one of the toughest economic times Ireland has experienced in decades, characterised by high unemployment and emigration figures. Records show that one in ten of all university graduates with a level eight degree were still seeking employment in 2008 (Higher Education Authority, 2010). The participants in this study, all of whom came through DEIS and Access programmes to support their education, displayed high levels of personal resourcefulness. In some instances, they used the connections they had made in their university-based extra-curricular activities to good effect.

*That same road that I was on wouldn't have come about had I not... it was a past pupil of DCU as well, involved in extracurricular... head-hunted me for that job (JS07).*

*You know it's funny that my current boss now... you know, I met her at a DCU event in New York City (MM08).*

Currently employed in a wide variety of careers that are mostly directly related to their area of university study, the participants demonstrate a sense that they are satisfied with how their lives have turned out to date. In an astute observation, one participant makes the distinction between having a career and having a job. He describes a job as being “mundane” but speaks about being “passionate” about a career. Career also implies a long-term perspective and progression rather than tasks performed simply to earn a living. His outlook contrasts sharply with the first-generation students in Redmond’s (2006, p.130) study and points towards an imagined “possible self” (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p.954) at odds with the embodied cultural and social capital inherited from his family (Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

*I wanted to be passionate about something. A career wasn't something that I had heard of. You had a job, and that was it, and you go to your job every week, and you get your wages, and you pay your bills and you... hang in until you get the next wage packet? That was it like. That's changed quite a bit now (NC10).*

For this access student, his route to a career was through education, and he decided consciously to pursue it. Though initially, the process of ‘becoming educated’ (Finnegan, 2017, p.157) raised issues for him amongst family and friends, he persevered and gained their support. “They rolled in behind me and were very supportive then” (NC10). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010, p.32) observe that this double transition, not only from one stage of education to another but also from one class to another, is qualitatively different for working-class students than for their middle-class counterparts, for who going to university is “simply the next step in a seamless, taken for granted, middle-class trajectory”.

*But it was the initial fear I think, of the unknown, of this person is moving out of our social circle to go to university, who does he think he is kind of situation. I remember being really hurt by it at the start, people saying “O you have a child to look after. You are so selfish, and you are going to attend college as a full-time student. That is ridiculous” (NC10).*

It is worth looking a little further at the ideas of education taking individuals beyond a job and into a career and of moving them beyond their immediate family networks. At the time

of writing these findings, three of the participants in the study are currently living and working in the United States of America; one since 2009 and the other two since 2017. One participant lives and works in London, having previously spent a year in New York. The remainder work in Dublin. Business, media and the advertising industry are the most popular career areas in which we find the participant group employed. One operates as a freelance consultant and part-time academic, one runs a private business, and two are in pastoral care roles.

The graduate running his own business spoke of a sense of frustration and expressed the opinion that while in some ways the university was “a fantastic place”, he was nonetheless “raring to go” in his career. The time actually impeded him and held him back from starting his career. “It yanked me back to year three and year four”.

*So when I got into DCU, I really struggled with a couple of things like the lack of structure around ... I just like being busy. I like doing things, and I just felt doing a four-year degree, 20 hours a week or 12 hours a week sometimes was just really unsatisfying ... I think for instance a lot of what was right for me was unpopular for DCU ... (AC11).*

Yet, while the same participant describes some university project work as irrelevant to real-life experience, he describes a degree as a necessity. His choice of language is illuminating as he describes his courses as “a safety blanket” and as “an insurance” in terms of developing a successful personal career. He was keen to insulate himself from the vagrancies of a wage that depended solely on a “job”, and that was based mainly on manual employment. Instead, he opted to take control of his own destiny in a plan that purposefully involved a sense of professionalism and “career” by starting and developing his own business.

*I’m ashamed to say it now, but it was an insecurity thing when I was a teenager, thinking needed it. You know what it was it was a safety blanket. I know that I had some level of self-awareness, not at the same level as I have now about entrepreneurship. Back then, I felt that I had to do business in DCU to give myself the insurance of options at the end of it (AC11).*

Experiencing the “disquiet, ambivalence and uncertainty” (Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p.28) which may arise when habitus encounters an unfamiliar field, he turned to his sports club and became increasingly involved in it, both as a player and as an administrator.

#### **4.6. Summary of the findings**

Without exception, the participants are explicit about the positive impact the DCU Access Department had on their student experience and identify the valuable role it played in easing their transition and progression. The support networks and structures it provides are identified throughout the analysis of the narratives as a form of social capital. The input of the Access department was “highly praised”, and similar to the students in Finnegan’s (2017, p.153) study, participants reported that without the Access programme they would never have made it into, or sometimes through, university. There was a particular emphasis on the value of the initial orientation or induction session, which takes place in the month immediately preceding the first weeks of the semester. This early introduction to university life and the opportunity to create a peer network and to build academic confidence was crucial, and the graduates remember it enthusiastically and vividly. These sentiments resonate with the Head of the DCU Access department who reports that they align significantly with findings from their six-week survey, which collects students’ initial impressions of their early weeks in DCU. The importance attached to this Summer school type programme is not confined to access programmes in Ireland. Such programmes are extensively deployed in elite Universities in the USA to enable first-generation students, in particular, to master the “Hidden Curriculum”, a phrase first coined by Jackson (1968). Margolis *et al.*, (2001) identify many and varied ‘hiddens’ in education, but in this context, it refers to the habitus (Bourdieu, 1993) which students of middle-class parents accumulate prior to entering higher education, providing them with a distinctive advantage when they cross the threshold of elite universities, attributable perhaps to “their self-assured relationship to the world” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). Collier and Morgan (2008, p.426) refer to the “implicit expectations” and “tacit understandings” that permeate the university experience. If this tacit knowledge is absent it



may hinder student success and achievement. Christie, Munro and Wagner (2005, p.27) indicate that the students in their study believed that their access course provided them with a “substantial head start in understanding the demands and the systems” they were likely to encounter in the elite university they attended.

Throughout the participants’ accounts, there is evidence that they recognise their possession of resilience, determination, perseverance and tenacity. These qualities, particularly resilience and an ability to cope with adversity, are similarly highlighted in Reay, Crozier and Clayton’s (2009) study of nine working-class students in an elite university. Duckworth, who has written extensively about this topic (2007, 2009, 2013, 2016) combines these qualities into the term “grit” and examines how it impacts on various aspect of human behaviour and interactions and the extent to which it is a predictor of achievement. Defining grit as passion and perseverance for long-term goals, which give meaning to almost all activity, she has devised a grit scale and outlined four psychological aspects of grit: interest, practice, purpose and hope. Duckworth suggests that these characteristics, combined with hard work, are formidable (Reed and Jeremiah, 2017). Of relevance to this study is the contention that participation in structured, challenging, yet enjoyable extracurricular activities can foster grit (Duckworth, 2016). She cites a Harvard University admissions officer who extols the virtues of involvement in extracurricular activities. The transferability of the hard work, singular energy and the discipline required in ECAs to other aspects of life is recognised and rewarded.

Financial constraints were a reality for many of the participants. Part-time work was a necessity for them, and its centrality in their lives meant that in many instances, they needed to travel to their home region to fulfil their work obligations. They allude to the impact this part-time work had on their involvement, but also how, despite this, they persevered and were successful. Evident in their accounts is an appreciation of the affordability of campus-based or university-related activities. Affordability, they claim, was critical to their participation. It appears that accessibility and affordability are essential and necessary factors to enable students to benefit from extracurricular engagement. The current DCU funding system supports students in their endeavours, and while not all activities are accessible (see

previous references to the skiing trip for example), the necessity to keep activities on campus affordable is paramount if non-traditional or low SES students are to be encouraged to engage (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016).

The participants displayed a keen awareness of the social capital gained and the importance of this for their university progression and subsequent employment. They cited specific examples of where they had deployed their networks, established and nourished by their involvement, to develop themselves and to enhance their career prospects, though there is no evidence to suggest that they used a “player strategy” (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) in their approach to engagement. Previous research (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011, Burke, 2015) has highlighted how middle-class students adopt a strategic outlook towards their engagement with extracurricular activities and, in contrast to low SES students, make deliberate choices about which activity to participate in deriving maximum benefit.

The graduates were equally aware and appreciative of the range of skills and competencies they developed, and the participants acknowledged the opportunity, which the Uaneen module afforded, for reflection and making sense of their experiences. The institutional recognition was also valued in terms of future employability as well as legitimising that participation (Thompson *et al.*, 2013).

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

This chapter set out the findings of the research, subdivided into four distinct but related themes. Interspersed with illuminative quotes from the participants, it has presented their narratives in an engaging and informative manner, designed to capture the interest and curiosity of the reader. It has also linked the findings to relevant literature and used Bourdieu’s conceptual tools to highlight pertinent phenomena. The concluding chapter of this thesis discusses the relevance of the research and presents recommendations, many of which lean heavily on the research, that emerge from the analysis.

## **Chapter 5    Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1.        Introduction**

This study arose from a desire to chart the journey of low SES (access) students who successfully engaged with the extracurricular activities offered at their university and to explore how this impacted their university experience. To achieve this, it posed three guiding questions:

- What motivates the initial and continued engagement of access students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with DCU programmes of study?
- What forms of capital are created through engagement in extracurricular activities, within and beyond DCU?
- What processes, practices and resources are needed to promote the creation of capital and other beneficial outcomes?

A case study approach considered not only the issues and obstacles they faced but also the many positive aspects associated with extracurricular involvement. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to explore these topics with the participants. Woods (1999, pp. 54–56) highlights the importance of including ‘other voices’ in the text, besides that of the author. To achieve this, the interviews, along with supporting documents, were analysed to produce a richly descriptive narrative, which foregrounds the complex and nuanced landscape, which this cohort traversed. The findings are presented under four themes and examined with reference to the literature explored in chapter two.

### **5.2.        The relevance of the research**

The introductory section of this thesis highlighted the lack of any comprehensive investigation of low SES individuals who had successfully engaged with extracurricular

activities during their time in university. This study, therefore, deliberately sought to focus on such a group. It presents their reflections on the personal and professional experience of that engagement and provides recommendations to contribute to the creation of an institutional culture, which facilitates and fosters engagement. In so doing, it addresses the lacuna, which exists. The study findings also have a practical application as they provide a contextual insight to inform policy and practice. Pending a successful outcome, the plan is to present the conclusions at the International Conference of College Unions International, scheduled for Atlanta, Georgia in spring 2020.

### **5.3. Limitations of the study**

Several relevant factors limit this study. Firstly, the study is small scale, with just eleven participants - nine graduates of the DCU Access Programme and the directors of two university Access programmes. Though it provides a deep and rich insight into the experience of those graduates, it only represents one in five of those who graduated with an Uaneen Module and from the Access Programme in fourteen years. Secondly, the participants, with one exception, are from just one university and to that extent, it is context-bound. The findings should be interpreted in this context. Thirdly, researcher biases and perceptual misrepresentations are potential limitations in any qualitative study; however, every effort was made to address these through quality assurance processes, such as making use of multiple data sources, member checking and maintaining a research audit trail. Despite these limitations, this small-scale study has nonetheless generated contextualised knowledge to develop a greater understanding of the experience of low SES students' engagement with ECAs (Yin, 2014).

### **5.4. Discussion**

The findings suggest that the participants in the study succeeded in their endeavours due to a combination of factors, some structural and some familial but also due to the agency they possessed. They succeeded against the background of a significant expansion in the number of university places, but where access to and choices about, higher education continue to be strongly influenced by social class (Brooks, 2008). O'Sullivan, Robson and Winters (2018)

highlight in their research how system-wide structural reforms are needed to empower students to develop an agentic approach to higher education choices. The earlier literature review discussed student engagement with an emphasis on extracurricular involvement and concluded that there is a belief that a high-quality university experience occurs in circumstances where there are abundant opportunities for extracurricular activity (Markwell, 2007). Therefore, while students are ultimately responsible for their learning and their levels of engagement, it does require conditions, policies, and a culture generated by the institution and staff that enable and encourage students to get involved (Kuh, 2008). Students from low SES backgrounds entering higher education are often required to familiarise themselves with university-specific culture and practices which up to then would not have been a part of their habitus. Crucially, these institutional cultures and traditions, which are often tacit, may be at odds with the background and norms of low SES students and this situation may result in their exclusion. More advantaged students, because of their inherited habitus, are familiar with the practices and norms of university life, and consequently, their success is inherently facilitated and guaranteed. Research suggests (Yorke and Longden, 2008) there were signs that the relatively disadvantaged were less positive about some aspects of their first-year experience than the general student body.

The previous chapter detailed the motivation of the participants pre DCU and charts how they continued to engage with DCU throughout their three or four programmes of study. It outlined the extent to which their families and their school environment influenced their choices prior to University and described the role the Access Department and their agency played in their continued engagement and subsequent successful navigation of the university terrain.

It also addressed the second guiding research question which explored the forms of capital gained through engagement. The participants displayed a keen awareness of the social capital gained and the importance of this for their university progression and subsequent employment. They cited specific examples of where they had deployed their networks, established and nourished by their involvement, to develop themselves and to enhance their career prospects, though there is no evidence to suggest that they used a “player strategy”

(Brown and Hesketh, 2004) in their approach to engagement. Previous research (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011, Burke, 2015) has highlighted how middle-class students adopt a strategic outlook towards their engagement with extracurricular activities and, in contrast to low SES students, make deliberate choices about which activity to participate in deriving maximum benefit. In addition to the acquisition of social capital, there is evidence from the participants that they accumulated cultural capital through their involvement with a wide range of activities beyond the merely academic. In particular, they refer to the opportunity such activities offered for affordable travel, an opportunity not always available to them prior to entering university.

The next short section and the recommendations which follow will focus on the third guiding question, namely what processes, practices and resources are needed to promote the creation of capital and other beneficial outcomes?

Classroom performance is not the only predictor of success. Higher education institutions must recognise that making a difference by merely facilitating students from traditionally underrepresented groups is not sufficient. What is required is a transformation of their policies and practices to give all students the academic and non-academic supports needed for success. Given the focus of this research, it is undoubtedly necessary to shed light on the extracurricular or social elements of student engagement and examine how institutions might enhance engagement in this sphere. The benefits of engagement in ECAs (Stuart *et al.*, 2008; Tomlinson, 2008; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Roulin and Bangerter, 2013b; Greenback, 2014) have been discussed at an earlier stage of the report. The real and substantial barriers to engagement in extracurricular for non-traditional students have also been exposed. Obstacles include the need to work part-time, family commitments and the difficulties associated with being a long-distance commuter student, generally out of financial necessity. Harper and Quaye (2015) highlight the social injustice of some students enjoying the beneficial by-products of engagement while others cannot.

Mass higher education has meant that university campuses are now characterised by a diversity of all kinds, including diversity of ability, age groups and educational backgrounds.

This study has identified that an institutional transformation, an adaption to the needs of students who enter without the necessary experience to engage fully with the broad curriculum inside and outside the classroom, is required to provide a successful experience for all. This should be an ongoing and organic process, which responds to the continually changing internal and external environment and which leads to integrated programmes and embedded approaches.

### **5.5. Recommendations**

In the context of this study, with its focus on extracurricular engagement, there is a clear objective; - to facilitate the inclusion and wider engagement of low SES students thereby ensuring that they derive the maximum benefit from their involvement. To achieve this inclusion and engagement, an institution must provide students with the opportunity to make sense of their experience and allow them to relate it to their personal and professional selves. The first and necessary step in this process is to create an institutional culture, which recognises the contribution of low SES students by moving away from a deficit model of such students and by reducing the incongruity between the habitus of low SES students and the university environment. The introduction of universal design is a critical component of this institutional change. The second step is to create the conditions necessary for involvement by introducing the concept at the earliest possible juncture, providing encouragement and removing any financial or logistical barriers. Students from low SES backgrounds typically lack the social and cultural capital required to ‘talk the talk’ and ‘walk the walk’ (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003) to navigate their way through the complex university terrain (Gallego and Hollingsworth, 2000). By creating opportunities for students to take part in extracurricular activities, the possibility of them acquiring social and cultural capital increases and, in turn, nurtures attitudes and behaviours necessary to succeed and maximise the benefits of attending an educational institution. The third step is to ensure that there is an avenue for those who are engaged to realise the value of this involvement.

A more comprehensive discussion on these steps, including recommendations which lean on the research, follows. The first section presents recommendations about institutional

changes which should be considered to create an inclusive institutional culture, which is the antithesis of what Reay (2005, p.105) terms a “hidebound institution which does not know how to deal with differences and especially class difference”.

*If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognise the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place —* (Margaret Mead, 1935).

### **5.5.1. Creating an inclusive University**

While access induction programmes and other interventions at second level are laudable and highly valued by those who partake, their very existence contains an assumption that there is a personal or individual deficit on the part of those from low SES backgrounds. Unfortunately, there is little or no recognition of the social or cultural assets of such students (Fox, 2016), and these assets are not valued or seen as ‘legitimate’ (Bourdieu, 1984). The existence of this socio-cultural incongruity (Devlin and McKay, 2011) becomes problematic as the students’ cultural capital is at odds with that valued in higher education. In response to this, Yosso (2005) argues for the recognition of ‘outsider knowledge’ and, in particular, what she characterises as ‘community cultural wealth’. The formal education system rather than recognising and appreciating working-class life experiences tends to devalue such experiences, and in doing so, rejects the legitimacy of their knowledge (Reay, 2017).

Much of the literature concerned with low SES students continue to be deficit-based, focusing on what students need to ‘overcome’ or how they need special supports on campus to succeed. There is an implicit assumption that “it is the working -class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture” (Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p.176). They must adjust to ‘fit in’ to university life (Thomas, 2002) and the idea of ‘fitting in’ is predicated on middle-class values and capabilities (Christie, Munro and Wagner, 2005). Middle-class students continue to be the reference point, and universities appear to be designed for them (Spiegler



and Bednarek, 2013). This ‘deficit model’ of access (Finnegan, Fleming and Thunborg, 2014) assumes that the prospective student must be fixed to fit in socially, culturally and academically with an established concept of higher education.

Fox (2016) suggests that, although valuable, access programmes which aim to enhance social and cultural capital, may in so doing fail to acknowledge societal structures which perpetuate the inherent inequalities. There is a failure to recognise that low SES and first-generation students bring fresh perspectives, heart, determination, and resilience to campus. Such students are not ‘deficient’ they simply bring different experiences that are often undervalued or invisible. Higher education institutions must see beyond the notion of ‘helping’ low SES students overcome what are perceived as ‘their’ cultural barriers and instead see the value of the voices, experiences, knowledge and perseverance that these students possess. Creating a space for non-traditional students to make sense of their experience, to negotiate the contradictions and tensions of their different worlds, and to see their skills of resilience and persistence as transferable to the learning environment will not alone be beneficial to the students but will also help build a richer, more diverse campus environment.

A more effective model of inclusion within HEIs, which embeds access in their core activities and which integrates different elements of access into a single coherent vision, would also enhance the learning environment (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). Slowey and Schuetze’s (2012, p.4) international review suggests that “overall, higher education has been slow to adapt its missions, structures and understanding of and learning—in short, its culture—to the demands for a more open, flexible and egalitarian system”. Other international studies, likewise, have suggested that a two-way process of change and development is required if non-traditional students are to enjoy a successful and productive experience of HE (Bamber and Tett, 2001; Billingham, 2009; Devlin and McKay, 2011). Reay (2018) too, proposes structural changes, so that rather than ‘blaming’ non-traditional students for not applying, universities need to make themselves more attractive to non-traditional students’ and she invokes them to bring their courses ‘into the 21st century, instead of staying in the 17th’.

Rather than depicting low SES students as the problem and offering special support programmes targeted only at some students, the recommendation is for the institutions to instead to make structural changes, embracing philosophies and introducing universally focused measures.

Due to their greater familiarity with the HE realm, based on immediate or extended family's experience, it is likely that students from middle-class backgrounds possess the "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1966) required to master the role of a HE student. Researchers in the field of widening participation have identified measures that may ensure that higher education environments align more closely with the life experiences, and the cultural identity, of non-traditional students. This is in line with the joint venture or bridge-building approach previously advocated. In Ferguson's (2017) interview, Reay invokes elite universities to examine their culture and ethos and urges them to use strengths-based language to reframe non-traditional students' qualities. A reframing of the university culture and ethos would benefit student engagement, their efficacy, their sense of belonging, and ultimately improve retention rates (Soria and Stubblefield 2014; Soria, 2015; Soria *et al.*, 2017). Jack (2019) reveals how the struggles of less privileged students continue long after they are admitted to and arrive on elite university campuses in the United States of America. He differentiates between admission and acceptance and documents how university policies and cultures can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities. Finnegan (2017) proposes some practical measures to ease the path of those for whom the milieu is unfamiliar at best and hostile at worst. Such measures could include the inclusion of working-class studies on the curriculum and the reconstruction of what is termed 'pedagogical encounters' and how such encounters may be reformed to make them more accessible and responsive to the needs of all students and not just non-traditional students. Leese (2010) reported how the students in her study stated that they needed more structured activities on campus to encourage them to fit in, and more support from academic staff, with clear instructions about what was expected of them. Consequently, addressing aspects of the undergraduate teaching and learning environment is likely to benefit the entire student cohort regardless of their status and not only improve outcomes for low SES students (Share and Carroll, 2013). What is required is a focus on the active creation of an institution-wide supportive and inclusive learning environment that

enables low SES students to concentrate on their learning and engagement, while simultaneously recognising that good practice in teaching and supporting low SES students benefits all students. Such institutional transformation must be viewed as an ongoing, organic process of innovation and embedding of learning that responds to a continually changing internal and external environment.

The practice of lecturers providing feedback, either informally or formally may have a significant impact on the learning experience of a student and this is particularly true for first-year students (Tinto, 2002, Nicol, 2009). In his influential study on feedback, Sadler (1989) highlights the conditions, which are necessary for students to benefit from feedback. Namely, knowledge of what good performance is, the ability to compare how their current performance relates to good performance and possession of the knowledge on how to close the gap between current and good performance. Critically, if students are to be in a position to apply feedback, meaningful and supportive interaction with lecturers is essential and seeking help should be normalised to ensure students feel more comfortable doing so (Clegg, Stevenson and Willott, 2010). Normalising requests for assistance is particularly critical for low SES groups who may fear being perceived as ‘needy’.

Some other measures to be considered include the introduction of Learning support units or Skills Centres as seen in University College Cork (UCC), which grew from their Access service but has been expanded and is now a service which all students can avail of ([www.ucc.ie/en/skillscentre/](http://www.ucc.ie/en/skillscentre/)). Similar units exist in DCU, such as the Maths Learning Centre (Dublin City University, 2019c). These initiatives embrace the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which creates curricula and learning environments designed to achieve success for a more extensive range of student abilities and disabilities. In this approach rather than focus on ‘fixing’ the student, the curriculum and its delivery is adapted to take account of individual learning differences and to cater to a diverse HE student population. Hockings (2010) cautions against, assuming that non-traditional students have ‘special needs’ and instead of providing special programmes, the provision of an integrated curriculum is a preferable approach. An integrated curriculum targets all students and

assumes that they bring different resources in the cognitive, linguistic, knowledge and cultural domains to the learning environment.

A Universal Design for Learning strategy is described as ‘an approach to teaching that consists of the proactive design and use of inclusive instructional strategies that benefit a broad range of learners, including students with disabilities’ (McGuire, Scott, and Shaw, 2006, p.169). In December 2018, the Teaching Enhancement Unit (TEU) in DCU organised a discussion forum on UDL as a means of positively impacting the learning experience of all students at DCU (Gormley, 2018). The Policy on UDL, which resulted from this and other fora, is due to be approved and implemented in 2019. By adopting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) philosophy, DCU aims to foster a flexible, creative and inclusive learning environment. The initiative is welcome, and this research recommends that teaching staff engage in further training in UDL and take on board the principles therein. In addition to the DCU offerings, there are many opportunities to do so, for example, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education offers professional development courses in the area of UDL (Higher Education Authority, 2017).

### **5.5.2. Encouraging and facilitating involvement**

Given the central role that the Access Department occupies in the student journey, it would appear that they are well placed to advise not only on academic norms and practical issues but also on the value of engagement beyond the formal curriculum. Specific reference to the intrinsic and extrinsic value of involvement in extracurricular activities could well prove to be valuable advice, and although this is encouraged during their summer orientation programme, it needs to be more explicit. The Office of Student Life is in a position to offer a module during the induction week, highlighting the many benefits of involvement and using the findings of this study to illustrate in a tangible and personal way the manner in which fellow access programme students have benefited. The personal narratives contained in the study are compelling. Mindful that students are motivated by alumni whom they perceive have walked in similar shoes (Packard and Hudgings 2002; Packard, 2016, 2018), the recommendation is that alumni, such as those interviewed as part of this study, be

invited to talk to the incoming students during orientation programmes or in the early stages of semester one. Passionate, enthusiastic and reflective about the positive effect of their activities, their contribution at this formative juncture could be transformative. Their desire ... “to lift as we climb” (Gupton *et al.*, 2009, p.258) should be captured.

McCoy *et al.* (2010, p.155) propose that access and participation need to be viewed “as the outcome of a longer-term process of educational engagement. Educational experiences, particularly in secondary school, play a central role in the longer-term educational trajectories”. Devlin and McKay (2014) likewise speculate that it is difficult to imagine an agenda concerned with the widening participation of low socioeconomic groups without the involvement of the schools. O’Sullivan *et al.* (2017) highlight the need for schools and HEIs to work in partnership to make changes to ensure that all students have the aspiration, motivation and agency to apply to university. In recognition of the need to engage students well in advance of higher education entry age, the DCU Access Department rolls out initiatives to between 8,000 and 10,000 primary and secondary school students in their linked Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) yearly.

Two programmes of particular interest are UniTY (Dublin City University, 2019d) and UFirst (Dublin City University, 2019e). UniTY is a skills-based programme for transition year (TY) students, designed to increase student engagement in education and raise motivation and career aspirations. Designed for fifth and sixth-year students, UFirst aims to give students the knowledge, confidence and skills needed to begin their university journey. This research suggests introducing the concept of engagement with extracurricular activities and its attendant benefits to these programmes. The UniTY programme (Dublin City University, 2019d) supports teachers in the designated schools to deliver modules in Multimedia and Social Innovation, Smart Skills, Student Empowerment and Employability and Leadership. It appears that there is scope to include a specific focus on engagement in one or more of these modules.

In addition to the measures outlined above, it is recommended that the ties between university sporting clubs and cultural societies and the link schools be strengthened and

formalised. Currently, this operates on an *ad hoc* and informal basis driven by the personal motivation (or lack thereof) of those involved in the committee at any given time. There are some examples of best practice in this space. For example, approximately five years ago, the DCU Boxing Club established a very successful outreach initiative with an inner-city Boxing club. The coaching partnership has been embedded in the culture and practice of the club. Other clubs, such as the rugby and GAA clubs, on request from the Access Department also facilitate short tournaments or games. Other once-off examples include the Hurling Club engaging with a local Club based in a disadvantaged area adjacent to the university. Although the OSL financially supports such efforts on request, no formal policy exists which encourages their establishment or continuation. This research recommends that such a policy be proposed, costed and implemented with a view to it becoming an inherent part of the fabric of the club or society.

### **5.5.3. Removing barriers to involvement**

If low SES students are introduced to ECAs and encouraged to participate, it is necessary to eliminate or at least minimise any barriers to participation that exist. Financial constraints were a reality for many of the respondents. The comments below are some of the many in the transcripts that illuminate this and the recommendations which follow were generated from the research. Part-time work was a necessity for them, and its centrality in their lives meant, that in many instances, they needed to travel to their home region to fulfil their work obligations. They allude to the impact this part-time work had on their involvement, but also how, despite this, they persevered and were successful.

The affordability of campus-based or university-related activities was critical to their participation, and this is frequently referred to in their accounts. Evident in these accounts is an appreciation of the affordability of campus-based or university-related activities. Affordability, they claim, was critical to their participation. It appears that accessibility and affordability are essential and necessary factors to enable students to benefit from extracurricular engagement. The current DCU funding system supports students in their endeavours, and while not all activities are accessible (see previous references to the skiing trip for example), the necessity to keep activities on campus affordable is paramount if non-

traditional or low SES students are to be encouraged to engage (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). DCU Clubs and Societies receive a subsidy from the €3,000 registration fee each undergraduate pays, or in the case of students on SUSI grants, is paid on their behalf by their grant authority. In the 2018-19 academic year this fee, known as the capitation fee, was €124 per full-time student. This fund is distributed, on application, to fund the activities of each of the 120 Clubs and Societies. The value of this system cannot be measured purely in monetary terms alone but also by reference to how it facilitates and encourages the involvement of a diverse student body. This same fund also finances the activities of the Students' Union and enables students to take a paid sabbatical leave from their studies to take on the elected role of a representative student officer, thereby opening up the possibility of being an elected representative to all students regardless of economic status. As indicated earlier, two of the participants in the study were full-time Students' Union officers during their time in DCU.

This research recommends that a discussion takes place between the Access Department and the Office of Student Life to investigate the possibility of establishing a specifically earmarked fund for low SES students who, despite the generous subsidies, may nonetheless face financial barriers to involvement. Such a fund recognises the reality that not all students are involved in campus-based or university-funded ECAs and may not, therefore, be in a position to fully exploit the opportunities on offer. There is potential to use the findings generated by this research to support the introduction of such an initiative.

#### **5.5.4. Making sense of activities and relating them to employability**

Previous research has suggested that higher education may serve as 'in-between' space, for reflection, individual agency and creativity (Finnegan 2012; Finnegan, Fleming and Thunborg, 2014; Merrill, 2015). It would appear that it represents an ideal forum for students to reflect on their experiences before graduation, and it may be particularly critical for access students. Accumulating life skills such as self-belief, confidence and hope, together with social and cultural capital is instrumental to future life prospects – something that the affluent intuitively understand, but which may not always be evident to low SES students. Middle-

class students are more adept at playing the game (Bourdieu 1986) and understand that in the context of increased participation in higher education, a degree is not enough and to be distinctive and gain a competitive edge, they need additional resources such as extracurricular activities (Burke, 2015; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). For low SES groups, it is more complex, and they face additional challenges. They may need to work part-time, and as identified above, their family habitus may not always recognise the value of ECA. Consequently, they need institutional support to persist in the face of challenges and difficulties to overcome the embodied social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which shapes and influences how they participate in ECAs and the meaning they attribute to that participation.

Increasingly, employability is about the acquisition of soft skills and capacities and assumes a reflective graduate who can marshal their skills and present themselves as an employable subject (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Low SES students need to appreciate the beneficial by-products of their engagement and understand the importance of networks as they influence the quantity of, and access to, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and in turn becomes a vital component of that social capital. As evidenced in the findings, cohesive networks positively influence the flow of career information and increase the possibility of securing employment (De Janasz and Forret, 2007).

The participants were both aware of and, appreciative of, the range of skills and competencies they developed and acknowledged the opportunity which the Uaneen module afforded for reflection. It allowed them to make sense of their experiences in the wider context of further education, career and civic society. The institutional recognition was also valued in terms of future employability as well as legitimising that participation (Thompson *et al.*, 2013). It is recommended that all students who enter DCU through the Access programme be facilitated to undertake the module in their final year. One effective measure, recommended as a result of the research, is to encourage their enrolment on the newly established DCU Engage Award which was introduced as a pilot project in 2018-19. The award is the university's response to their aspiration to "introduce a new DCU Extracurricular Engagement Award that will recognise participative learning 'outside the classroom'", contained in the DCU Strategic Plan (Dublin City University (2016, p.21). A joint initiative between the Office of Student Life



and the Student Support and Development unit, it was rolled out to all students in the academic year 2019-20. The award formally recognises student engagement with university life and civic society and provides a clear and structured approach to self-development and achievement outside of the formal curriculum. It is promoted as a structured way to make the most out of the university experience and to meet new people and students may step on-board at any level. This research recommends that all students who enter through the access programme be facilitated at a minimum to complete the first of three levels- the Bronze Award. This level is deliberately light touch and designed to draw students into the fabric of the university as early as possible in their student journey, and while it is intended for all incoming students, its value to access students would be particularly beneficial.

Previously, as an element of the Office of Student Life Leadership Programme of Development (POD), there were tentative steps to encourage all students involved in sports and societies committees to enrol in a programme intended to increase their awareness of the transferability of skills gained to post-graduation employment. These tentative steps have not been sufficiently developed or encouraged, and this research recommends that this programme be reintroduced as a joint initiative between the Office of Student and the DCU Careers service. Students who are enrolled in the DCU Engage Award, and in the Uaneen module are well placed to benefit from mentoring or guidance in making the connection between their ECAs and their employability. The hope is that the self-reflection facilitated by the Uaneen Module will allow the study cohort to make sense of and repackaging their ECAs to link them to the employability agenda and their possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986; Toole and Toole, 1995). Furthermore, this skill of self-reflection will help develop students to become reflective practitioners, and to “take decisions more accurately and quickly by drawing upon effective, trustworthy intuition” (Bolton, 2010, p. 5). A refocusing of the assessment criteria of the Uaneen module to emphasise explicitly how ECAs link to a self beyond the gates of the university would be worthwhile. This recommendation resounds with the literature as outlined in chapter two, where Stuart *et al.* (2008) recognising the value of what they call a “whole life” experience, urge universities to facilitate a system whereby students can make sense of their experiences and in turn relate them to employment opportunities.

#### 5.5.5. “Fish in DCU Water”

In an earlier chapter, Bourdieu’s “fish in water” phrase was introduced to explain how he perceived a middle-class, or more advantaged student seamlessly makes the transition from school to university. For the more advantaged, going to university is a normative choice and a rite of passage; something that has always been expected and it is what their families do. It is an essential element and part of the natural trajectory of their lives (Reay, 2009; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). Their transition is seamless. In comparison, for some of the participants in this study, going to university was a mobility project: the chance to get away from economically depressed areas or to take advantage of opportunities denied their parents. Compared to students from affluent and educated families, who display high levels of comfort and ease when navigating the system (Bourdieu, 1996) for some in this study, the struggle was real and palpable. Nonetheless they demonstrated great resilience and commitment to their studies and to their extracurricular activities, often in the face of adverse circumstances, but succeeded and graduated successfully. West, Fleming and Finnegan (2013) reveal how, notwithstanding that university can be a problematic habitus for low SES or non-traditional students, becoming a “fish in water” is possible. They refer to Honneth’s (2007) perspective on identity formation and its reliance on interpersonal relationships and personal experiences and propose that the ideas of Honneth have significant implications for understanding, among other phenomena, the experience of non-traditional students in Higher Education. Honneth’s Theory of Recognition is comprised of three elements, which he claims are necessary for the formation of a positive self-concept. These are self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Dotted throughout the accounts of the participants in this study are nuggets, which suggest that their involvement in their preferred activity did contribute to an increase in some if not all these elements. However, university processes, practices and resources which encourage and support such engagement are vital if this to occur.

Although there is no scale to measure pride, self-esteem, self-concept, self-respect and enthusiasm, the zeal and passion with which the participants shared their life histories and achievements is telling. Likewise, there is no mechanism to capture these emotions in a

transcribed interview, but they were apparent during the conversations. It is not possible to map the acquisition of these elements directly to ECAs solely, but the voice of the participants is unequivocal that this involvement was a significant contributor to the growth of a positive self- concept.

The literature on student persistence has been dominated by Tinto (1993, 2002, 2012) for over a quarter of a century and though traditionally institutionally focused, in recent years he has shifted his perspective from student retention to student persistence (Tinto, 2017). Though the two perspectives are related, they are not the same, and his student-centric conceptual model of persistence argues that what students require to persist is self-efficacy, a sense of belonging and a perception that the curriculum is valuable. Scanlon *et al.* (2019) point to the importance of targeted supports in actively encouraging friendship development in the early stages of low SES students' university life. The argument is presented here that involvement in ECAs contributes positively to the conditions necessary for student persistence, in particular by fostering a sense of belonging. The detailed excerpts from the interviews lend credibility to this claim. Drawing on Honneth's (2007) elements of a positive self-concept, to which ECAs contribute, and Tinto's (2017) student persistence claim it is safe to conclude that the participants' engagement with extracurricular activities contributed to the development of a healthy and robust self-concept. It also contributed to their self-efficacy and to their feeling of belonging and resulted in the participants becoming 'fish in water' during their DCU tenure.

## **5.6. Suggestions for future research**

This study did not attempt an in-depth investigation of the factors which motivated the participants to get involved in their chosen activity. The inclusion of this element would strengthen the research by providing a deeper understanding of the students' attitudes to ECA engagement when they entered DCU and enable initiatives and incentives to be applied in a more targeted way.

There are no accurate figures available for the number of low SES students who actively engage with sporting, cultural, voluntary or community activities in DCU. While it is possible to ascertain the numbers taking the Uaneen module in their final year, this is not the complete picture as it only captures those who formally enrol. A significant cohort of the student body who are involved decides for various reasons not to take the module. Anecdotally the Access Department is aware of students who may be involved, but before this study, there was no attempt to research this area thoroughly. Even so, based on the literature reviewed in chapter two, it is not unreasonable to conclude that a sizeable majority of low SES students face barriers to engagement in the extracurricular sphere in DCU, like other HEIs investigated. Further research is required to investigate access students who do not, or more worryingly cannot, engage in a meaningful way with the ECA agenda. A longitudinal study to track the progress of a cohort would be illuminative.

The participants in this study graduated between four and twelve years ago and their accounts, therefore, reflect the circumstances and conditions of that time. This generation of students faces new challenges, not least the spiralling cost of accommodation and the negative impact this has on low SES students from rural areas. The phenomenon of students commuting long distances, sometimes up to two hours each way per day is no longer a rare occurrence bringing with it obvious implications for engagement. Previous research (Manley Lima, 2014) has demonstrated a strong positive relationship between commuter students' involvement in ECAs and their sense of belonging in a university. It follows that the perils of the commuter student, which includes not just low SES students but those from all economic backgrounds as highlighted in the international literature (Carroll-Meehan and Howells, 2018), is worthy of further exploration in the context of DCU access students.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a brief recap of the study and identified its relevance to the corpus of knowledge as well as outlining its limitations. There followed a discussion regarding the literature and the previously presented findings. It included recommendations to improve the practices and processes of higher education institutions to make them more inclusive and

to recognise, appreciate and acknowledge the qualities and attributes of all students and not just those possessed by more traditional students. It concluded with suggestions for future research.

## **5.8. Reflection**

There are few days in the university calendar more fulfilling and emotional than graduation days. The special ceremony for the Uaneen Graduates and their extended families is particularly special. Intimate and informal, compared to the pomp and ceremony of the Degree conferring ceremony, the graduates and their families drink tea, eat sandwiches and bite-sized pastries while mingling with the staff who have supported them in their “outside the classroom” learning. The university president drops in and assures everyone that these are the extraordinary graduates and deserve to be celebrated as such. His sentiments appear to reassure the parents. Self-satisfied graduates nod and turn to them as if to say - “see I told you that it was worthwhile and that it was really learning and I am more employable as a result and to cap it all, I am an engaged citizen who contributes to society”.

To be central to such an occasion is emotional and rewarding. Each of graduates has their own story to tell - Uaneen is that type of module, no two are the same. The confident, self-assured graduates are smiling, proud of their newfound status as the university’s newest alumni. The access graduates are not identified or identifiable. Occasionally, however, there is a glimpse of the discomfort associated with unfamiliar processes and surroundings as it assaults their parents or their grandparents. It evokes memories of a similar day almost 35 years ago.

The opportunity to give graduates a voice in this study has been equally rewarding, and it is only now as the process nears its conclusion that there is a need to acknowledge the emotional engagement involved (Herman, 2010). This emotional engagement, rather than being an impediment, has been an asset as “the researcher’s self-understanding, and self-reflection strengthens the research” (Herman, 2010, p.284). This study has foregrounded the voices of the graduates, and there is no ambiguity about the sincere and heartfelt gratitude felt towards

them. It is fitting, therefore, that the final sentiments should be those of a participant from an area local to the university who entered DCU as a nineteen old father. One of nine children, and the first in his family to progress to further education, he is grateful for the encouragement and support and proud of what he has achieved through his engagement inside and outside the classroom. He continues to volunteer in his local community, and he proudly explains, “I am now on the Development Education Committee. This for me was something I had never seen myself being part of as I felt only the socially elite get to be on Committees and Boards”.

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### **Appendix A: Marking rubric for Uaneen Module**

First class honours	70%-100%
Second class honours Grade 1	60%-69%
Second class honours Grade 2	50-59%
Third class honours	40%-49%
Fail	less than 40%

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Level of involvement - 20 marks</b>
<b>1st</b>	<b>Evidence of sustained level of involvement, responsibility and leadership and management in extracurricular activities for a least a minimum of two years.</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Evidence of sustained level of involvement, responsibility and management in extracurricular activities for a least a minimum of two years.</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Evidence of sustained level of involvement, in extracurricular activities for a least a minimum of one year or in the case a self-contained extracurricular project for the duration of that project.</b>
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Evidence of active participation in extracurricular activities for at least one year.</b>
<b>FAIL</b>	<b>Insufficient evidence of involvement in extracurricular activities.</b>

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Competencies gained – 30 marks</b>
<b>1st</b>	<b>Demonstration of a level of proficiency in a diverse range of competencies, including but not limited to -planning, implementation, communication, leadership, team skills, negotiation, networking, evaluation, critical analysis, problem solving, decision making, managing multiple tasks, time management and research skills.</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Demonstrate proficiency in a wide range of the following -planning, implementation, communication, leadership, team skills, negotiation, networking, evaluation and critical analysis, problem solving, decision making, managing multiple tasks, time management and research skills.</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Demonstration of proficiency in a range of the following –planning, implementation, communication, leadership, team skills, negotiation, networking, evaluation, and critical analysis, problem solving, decision making, managing multiple tasks, time management and research skills.</b>
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Demonstration of proficiency in at least two of the following –planning, implementation, communication, leadership, team skills, negotiation, networking and critical analysis, problem solving, decision making, managing multiple tasks, time management and research skills.</b>
<b>FAIL</b>	<b>Insufficient evidence of proficiency in any of the above competencies</b>

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Self -reflection, Motivation, Value and Ethics – 30 marks</b>
<b>1st</b>	<b>Consideration and articulation of own passions, values and motivations and ethics. Reflection on impact of decisions on self, others and the wider group or society.</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Consideration and articulation of own passions, values and motivations and ethics. Reflection on impact of decisions on self and others.</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Evidence of reflection on own learning and questioning of impact on self and others.</b>
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Description of own learning and impact on others with little or no analysis.</b>
<b>FAIL</b>	<b>Insufficient evidence of any reflection on own learning and impact on others.</b>

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Presentation and Organisation and structure of portfolio – 20 marks (quality of writing, use of language, layout and design)</b>
<b>1st</b>	<b>Well-structured, fluent, readable, accurate and coherent work combining excellent standard of presentation and creative use of materials (where relevant).</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Well-presented, fluent, readable and accurate work.</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Appropriately presented, ideas clearly communicated, use and accuracy of language satisfactory</b>
<b>3rd</b>	<b>Presentation satisfactory, reasonable clarity of expression and use of language.</b>
<b>FAIL</b>	<b>Expression and presentation not of a minimum acceptable standard</b>

## **Appendix B: Email sent to graduates from Head of DCU Access Department**

Dear XXX,

Úna Redmond, the Manager of the Office of Student Life and the Module Coordinator for the Uaneen Module, is undertaking research as part of her Ed.Doc here in DCU. In her research, she hopes to focus on the impact of sustained engagement with extracurricular activities for students who are graduates of the Access Programme.

She is seeking volunteers who may be interested in helping with this. As you are a graduate of both the Uaneen Module and the Access programme, I was hoping you might be able to help. This would not be an onerous task and would take the form of an in-depth interview with a time commitment of 1-2 hours on your part. The Access Programme is very supportive of this research as it will provide some insights into the value of engagement with extracurricular activities, while in DCU and subsequently. If you are interested and willing to assist I would ask that you contact Úna directly at [una.redmond@dcu.ie](mailto:una.redmond@dcu.ie). She will be in a position to explain in greater detail the focus of her research, give an indication of the type of interview etc. and make further arrangements.

Best wishes,

Cathy.

## Appendix C: Email to respondents

Re: Uaneen and access research 📧



**Una Redmond** <una.redmond@dcu.ie>

Tue, 14 Feb 2017, 18:49 ☆ ↩ ⋮

to [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope this finds you well. Late last year you kindly agreed to help with some research I am doing with graduates of the Access Programme who have also completed the Uaneen Module. Hopefully, you are still in a position to do so. I have been working away since and have secured ethical approval from the DCU Research and Ethics Committee (REC), which is attached. I have also attached a Plain Language Statement and an Informed Consent form, both of which will provide some further information for you. Once you have had an opportunity to review them maybe you could revert and we can take it from there.

Best regards,

Úna



## **Appendix D: Plain language Statement**

### **PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT**

#### **1. Plain Language Statement for Research Participants**

- Introduction to the Research Study. The research working title is *exploring the perceived benefits of sustained engagement with Extra-Curricular activities by a cohort of graduates of the Dublin City University Access Programme*.
- The research is being conducted by Úna Redmond, a Ed.Doc student in the Faculty of Education, in DCU
- Úna Redmond can be contacted at [Úna.Redmond@dcu.ie](mailto:Úna.Redmond@dcu.ie)

#### **2. Details of Involvement in the Study**

- Participants will be required to be available for at least one face-to-face or skype interview with the principal researcher.
- It is possible that the researcher will request a follow-up interview.
- Interviews should last no longer than 1 hour.
- The researcher will ask for access to interviewee's Uaneen portfolio.
- The researcher will request that interviews be recorded (audio only) in order to facilitate data gathering and subsequent data analysis.
- Participants retain the right to decline the researcher's request to record an interview.
- Interviews will take place during the 2016/17 academic year.

#### **3. Potential Risks to Participants arising from involvement in the Research Study**

- It is not envisaged that there will be any risks to participants arising from involvement in the study.

#### **4. Benefits (direct or indirect) to Participants**

- It is intended that the outcomes of this study will help better inform the Access Programme of the benefits of engagement with Extra Curricular with a view to supporting this. Therefore, it is hoped that future DCU students, may indirectly benefit from participation in the study in the future.

#### **5. Procedures aimed at protecting confidentiality**

- Every effort will be made to respect participants' anonymity.
- The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone.
- Participants' actual names will be protected.

- Interview notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location.

## **6. Data Destruction**

- It is planned to destroy the data collected from interviews within three years from the initial date of collection.

## **7. Voluntary Participation**

- Participants may withdraw from the Research Study at any point.
- There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

## **8. Additional Information**

- It is envisaged that in total approximately 10-12 participants will be interviewed as part of this study.
- All participants will be graduate students of the DCU Access Programme and the DCU Uaneen Module.
- Follow up with all participants will be provided and a copy of the research made available if requested.

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

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

## **Appendix E: Informed Consent Form**

### **DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY**

#### **I. Research Study**

##### **I.Title**

*Exploring the perceived benefits of sustained engagement with extracurricular activities in a cohort of graduates of the Dublin City University Access Programme.*

#### **II. Clarification of the purpose of the research**

The research is part of the requirements for an Ed. Doc currently ongoing in Dublin City University. It is being conducted by Úna Redmond. B.Soc.Sc, MBS. MSc. and supervised by Dr Martin Stynes, from DCU's Institute of Education.

#### **III. Confirmation of requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement**

Requirements may include involvement in audiotaped interviews, possibly completion of questionnaire and access to completed Uaneen portfolio.

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

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) Yes/No

I understand the information provided Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped Yes/No

I consent to access to my Uaneen Portfolio. Yes/No

**IV. Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary**

I may withdraw from the Research Study at any point.

**V. Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.**

I understand that very effort will be made to respect my anonymity and that the data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone and that my actual name will be protected. Any Interview notes and/or transcripts and my completed Uaneen portfolio will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location. I understand that the data collected from interviews will be destroyed within three years from the initial date of collection.

**VII. Signature:**

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

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

## Appendix F: Ethics Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



Ms Úna Redmond  
**DCU Institute of Education**  
REC Reference: DCUREC/2016/172

24 October 2016

**Proposal Title:** Exploring the perceived benefits of sustained engagement with Extra-Curricular activities in a cohort of graduates of the Dublin City University Access Programme

Applicant(s): Úna Redmond and Martin Stynes

Dear Úna,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Donal O'Gorman'.

Dr Dónal O'Gorman  
Chairperson  
DCU Research Ethics Committee

**Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht**  
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,  
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

**Research & Innovation Support**  
Dublin City University,  
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000  
F +353 1 700 8002  
E [research@dcu.ie](mailto:research@dcu.ie)  
[www.dcu.ie](http://www.dcu.ie)



## **Appendix G: Aids for Reflexive journal**

**Key questions for the researcher's reflexive journal:**

**Source:** <https://researchdesignreview.com/2014/03/30/reflections-from-the-field-questions-to-stimulate-reflexivity-among-qualitative-researchers/>

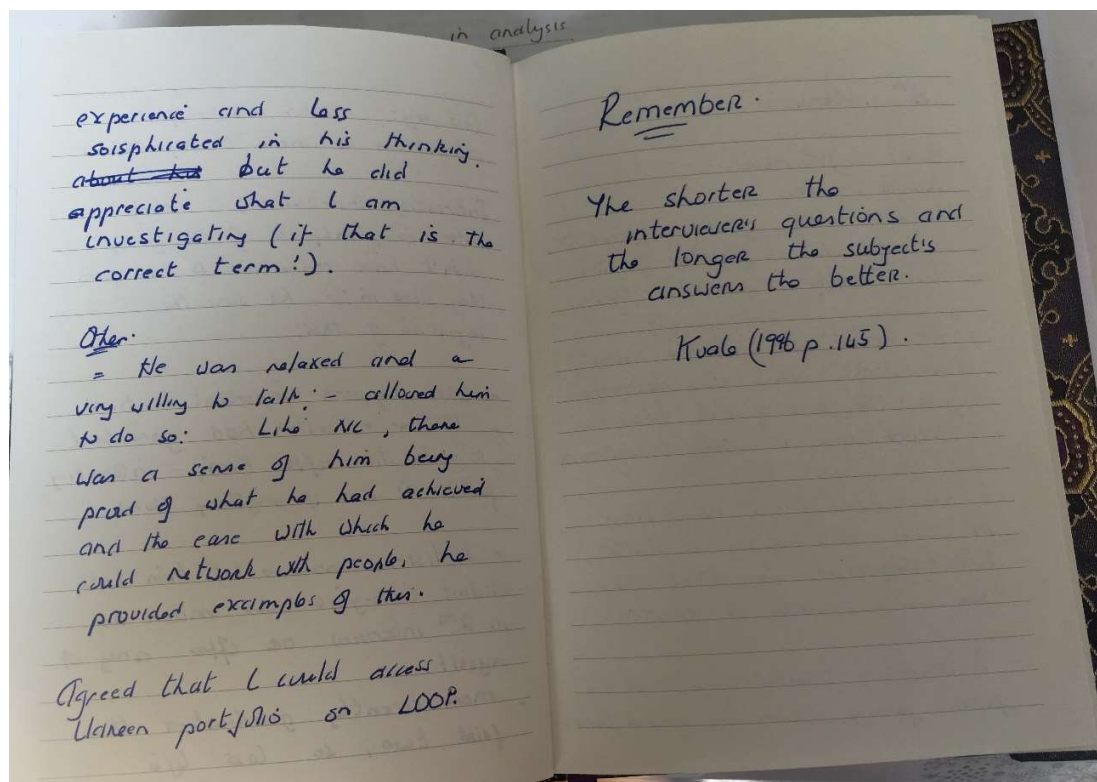
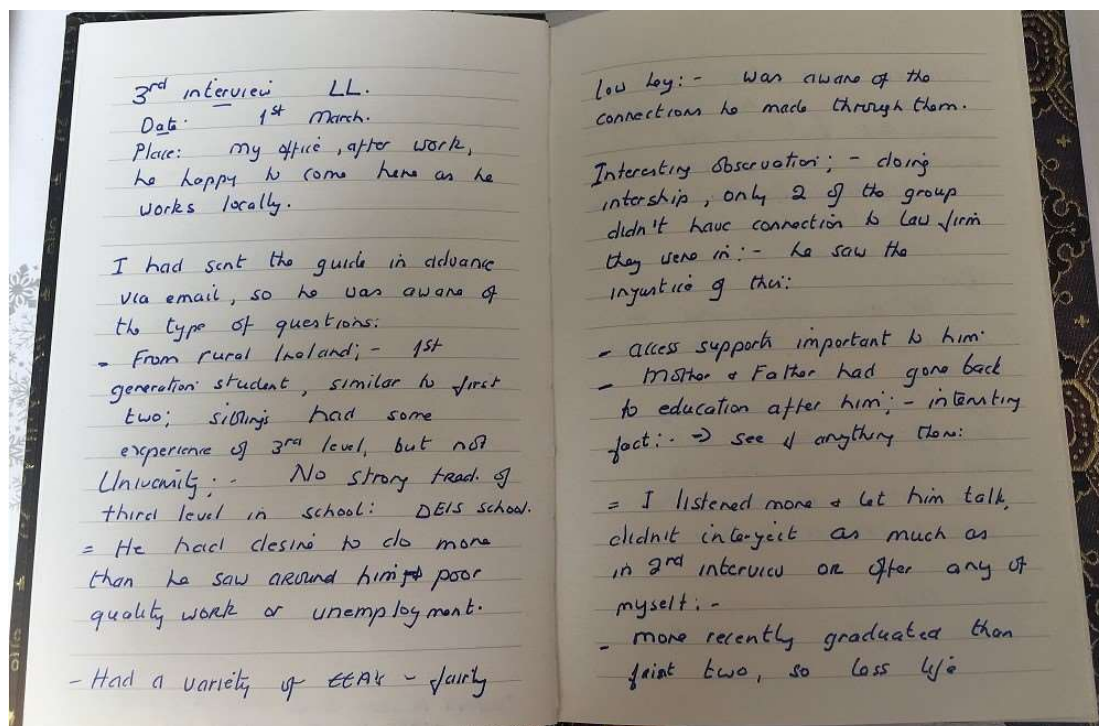
**Broad Takeaways from the Research Event (e.g., the IDI, the focus group, the observation)**

- What do I think I “know” from this/these participants?
- How do I think I “know” it?
- Will this knowledge change the course of the research, in terms of objectives, methods, line of inquiry; and, if so, how?

### **Specific Reflections on the Experience**

- Assumptions
  - What assumptions did I make about the participant(s)?
  - What assumptions did I make about comments/responses to my questions?
  - How did these assumptions affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behaviour?
- Values, beliefs, life story, social/economic status
  - How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behaviour?
- Emotional connection with the participant(s)
  - To what degree did my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behaviour?
  - How will my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect the analytical process and my ability to draw valid interpretations from the data?
- Physical environment and logistics
  - How did the physical setting/location of the research event alter how I related to the participant(s), and how the participant(s) related to me?
  - How did the physical setting/location affect data collection?
  - What were the logistical issues (e.g., in gaining access) that contributed to the “success” or weakness of the outcomes?

## Appendix H: Sample reflexive journal entries



Second interview: NCIO

Date: Feb 21<sup>st</sup> 2017

Place: My office; offered to do it wherever he liked but opted to come to DCU. = evening time.

Used the revised interview guide as amended following pilot interview.

- I did not know him beforehand and had no recollection of Ulaan portfolio, though I may have seen it.

He was a good interviewee, very articulate & enthusiastic. He has a good story, local lad, teenage parent, who decided to go to Uni, following a remark from customer in shop. He clearly enjoys recounting his "journey".

= He declared that he has a good life now, married, home & 3 children. Spoke fondly of his daughter and how she talks about going to Uni (she is 12). = compares that to his own schooling & early years.

= Very engaged by DCU & ECAU -

= still feels connected: - to DCU careers.

#### Observations

= Don't share my own story, not about me; though so much of what he says resonates, so difficult not to share notes. Keep this to myself; and let them talk: -

= His ~~young~~ parenthood at an early age may be relevant and

may relate to some findings in literature: → keep in mind.

→ at end of interview he suggested sharing interview guide in advance with other interviewers.

- will consider this for future.

Overall very positive and I feel energised by meeting him and have a commitment to keep going to "reward" him for being so co-operative and forthcoming.

→ Will send on Ulaan as requested.

24<sup>th</sup> Feb. ~~17~~

Decided to leave blank page in case I want to add anything else.