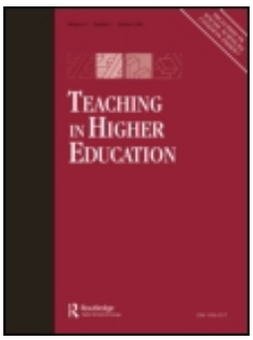

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Dependence-deconstruction: widening participation and traditional-entry students transitioning from school to higher education in Ireland

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Equality and quality in higher education (HE) are frequently juxtaposed in the literature. This paper presents evidence to contest deficit assumptions about widening participation, particularly the belief that entering HE with 'non-traditional' entry qualifications lowers standards. Drawing on a three-year constructivist grounded theory study with 45 school-leaver-aged access (SLA) and traditional-entry (TE) students at an Irish university, this paper explores how both groups managed the (academic) transition to HE. Despite lacking academic self-confidence, the SLAs reported being far more prepared for HE than did the TEs. Further, both groups reported similar academic experiences and achieved similar degree results. Indeed, in their transition from the 'spoon-feeding' school environment to the HE independent learning approach, the TEs struggled more than did the SLAs initially, requiring significantly more 'deconstruction' from their dependent approach. For both groups, however, their perception of what would be rewarded in assessment was the key factor influencing their approach.

Keywords: widening participation; student experience; falling standards; social class

Massification, widening participation, and 'falling standards'

Higher education (HE) internationally has witnessed massive growth in recent decades, with participation rates of 50% and above being relatively commonplace. In Ireland, the overall participation rate is currently approximately 60% (Byrne, McCoy, and Watson 2009), and for 17–19 year olds it is 53% (Higher Education Authority (HEA) 2010a). A goal of 72% of the population at typical age of entry by 2020 has been set (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs 2007) and this has been endorsed by the HEA (2008), although there has been a lack of critical discussion about the rationale for, and implications of, such a target. Similar to the international experience, despite 'massification', significant social class disparities remain in Irish HE (HEA 2010b; McCoy et al. 2010). Given that the participation rate of higher socioeconomic groups has reached saturation point (O'Connell, Clancy, and McCoy 2006), progress towards the 72% target will inevitably mean increased recruitment from lower socioeconomic groups. In this context, the lack of focus in Ireland on the post-entry student experience and widening participation (WP) is unfortunate, and research in this area has been called for (Keane 2009a; McCoy et al. 2010).

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The 'student experience' needs to be viewed in the context of a discourse which connotes 'massification' and WP to 'falling standards' (e.g. Furedi 2004). Research suggests academics believe that the 'calibre' of students at undergraduate level has declined. Students are reported as being less equipped for HE (McInnis 1999), insufficiently 'qualified' and prepared (Casey 1999), highly dependent and instrumental (Keane 2006), reliant upon rote-learning 'to the test' approaches, unable to think for themselves, and as expecting to be 'spoon-fed' having experienced this approach in schools (cf. Walshe 2009). In this context, student support has become 'pathologised' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003), and is usually negatively connoted to 'WP' students (ibid.; Haggis and Pouget 2002; Read, Archer, and Leathwood 2003).

Two points here are of note. The first is the fear that admitting pupils on 'low' points[1] scores and/or with 'non-traditional' academic qualifications somehow negatively affects the 'quality' of students in terms of their 'ability', thus lowering standards (cf. Osborne and Leith 2000; Walshe 2009). This fear is based on unproblematised meritocratic beliefs about the relationship between achievement, 'ability', and factors such as social class (Gillborn 2008). This is in spite of the imperfect relationship between entry qualification and degree performance (Commission on the Points System 1999; Williams 1997) and research which suggests that 'non-traditional' students perform *at least as well* as their 'traditional' counterparts (cf. Delaney, Harmon, and Redmond 2010; Gallacher and Wallis 1993; Molloy and Carroll 1992, in Osborne, Leopold, and Ferrie 1997, 162).

The second point is that, particularly in Ireland, the quality of post-primary education as a preparation for HE is increasingly questioned: students' dependence and instrumental approach is seen to arise from the 'outdated exam system' and 'assembly-line model of education' (O'Kelly 2009). Criticisms have been levied at the Irish system for more than a decade, and continue to be (The Strategy Group and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2011), yet a viable alternative has yet to be implemented, despite important development and reform work by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)[2] in recent years.

Internationally the 'gap' between school and HE is noted, with HE constituting a significant contrast to students' school experiences. Academically, students typically have unrealistic expectations about workload and class size, find standards to be higher than expected and this academic 'culture shock' produces anxiety and other emotional reactions (Bennett and Kottasz 2006; Christie et al. 2008; Cook and Leckey 1999; Lowe and Cook 2003). Research suggests that students experience difficulty adapting to independent learning (Christie et al. 2008; Thomas and Quinn 2007) and becoming conversant with, and proficient in, academic discourse (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Turner 2001). Thomas and Quinn (2007) note that the transition may be additionally challenging for those from under-represented groups, particularly 'first generation' students.

Methodology

In the context of WP and connotations of 'dumbing down', we know relatively little about the post-entry academic experiences of different student groups. This paper draws on a three-year study exploring the post-entry academic and sociocultural experiences of 45 school-leaver-aged access (SLA) and traditional-entry (TE)

students at an Irish university. Located within the interpretive paradigm, the study employed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the 'under-theorised' (Thomas and Quinn 2007, 15) field of WP. A constructivist approach involved a rejection of the traditional objectivist ontology, and a move away from seeing the researcher as passive or neutral, with an emphasis instead on the researcher-participant relationship. Further, a constructivist approach facilitated participant involvement in data interpretation and theory-building. Data collection included background information questionnaires, two rounds of individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews,[3] and email updates.

The SLAs were from lower socioeconomic groups and had entered HE following the successful completion of a one year pre-entry access course, having not achieved adequate 'points' in the Leaving Certificate to progress to HE through the 'traditional' route. The TEs generally were from higher socioeconomic groups and had entered HE through the 'traditional' route.[4] Of the 23 SLA participants, at the commencement of the study, six were in first year, seven were in second year, and 10 were in third year. 17 were doing Arts subjects, three were Commerce students, one was doing Science, one was a Nursing student, and one was doing Law. Sixteen were female, and seven were male. The 22 TEs were 'matched' (i.e. in terms of sex, year of birth, academic discipline, year of study, etc.) as far as possible to this group.[5] Thus, the majority of participants did Arts-related subjects (34 of 45) and were female (32 of 45), and the findings should be interpreted in that context. In Ireland, a majority of former access students progress to Arts-type programmes (McGuire, Collins and Garavan 2003; Murphy 2009).

The research was conducted in the 'University of Ireland',[6] one of the Republic's seven universities. The HE sector also consists of 14 Institutes of Technology,[7] several Colleges of Education, and a number of private, independent institutions. The university is similar to the other six universities in many respects, for example, in its programme provision, its student intake and characteristics, and aspirations to be 'world-class'. Both the TE and SLA students at the University of Ireland are broadly similar to such students in the other six Irish universities.

This paper considers how the two participant groups adjusted to HE academically, in the particular context of coming from what they perceived as a dependency-forming school system.

Transitioning from dependence to independence

The participant groups reported significantly different school experiences. Many of the SLAs had had very negative experiences; they commonly reported having 'hated' it, perceiving that their teachers had low expectations of them, and noting difficult relationships with teachers more generally. For example, Marianne (3SLA[8]) explained that she 'didn't think the teachers had any confidence in me'. Jamie (2SLA) remarked that '... the few that they considered wouldn't ... go on to university ... slowly were pushed out or left'. Several reported that stresses and responsibilities in their home lives prevented them from engaging adequately in study. In contrast, the TEs reported very positive experiences of school. They talked about having 'loved the school' and of the teachers being 'very good ... very interested in what you were doing' (Marcella 3TE). Contrary to the low expectations

perceived by the SLAs, the TEs reported that 'it's assumed that you will go to college . . . we're almost just programmed to think that's the next step . . .' (Fiona 3TE).

Both groups described learning at school as very dependent. 'Hunted' (Larissa 2TE) for their work, they were heavily monitored and individually supported. Riona (1SLA) noted that 'teachers would be telling you what to read, what you've to do, what you've to know for the examination . . .'. Liam (2TE) explained that 'the teacher makes a plan for you . . . gave you everything . . . if you don't do it then your teacher is always on your case'. Participants also viewed learning at school as being 'for the teachers rather than doing it for myself' (Marianne 3SLA). They claimed that they had little freedom in their learning and felt it was 'just all enforcement' (Clare 1SLA). Having to study subjects at school which they did not find interesting caused several to 'switch off'.

Learning at school was conceptualised as 'read, remember, regurgitate' (Duncan 2SLA), involving 'memorising . . . being spoon-fed and . . . reciting pre-prepared answers' (Derrick 3TE). Learning was seen to be almost exclusively 'geared towards the one final examination' and thus 'a memory test' (Paul 2SLA). As Sally (3TE) remarked, 'your teachers tell you "This is going to come up in the exam . . ." and that's all you learn'. Information was also to be reproduced in a particular way: 'you have to have your certain way of writing it out and . . . reciting everything off' (Brenda 3SLA). There was a belief in right and wrong answers, and very little emphasis on understanding; participants admitted that they would 'just learn off long essays . . . word for word and not know what they meant' (Johanne 3TE). They also felt that there was 'no room for opinion or ideas or creativity' (Glenda 1SLA) and 'not enough emphasis on thinking' (Derrick 3TE). Clare (1SLA) claimed that '. . . if you had an opinion you were told to put down your hand'. The SLAs found this approach most off-putting and it was a serious contributor to their disengagement from school. While the TEs were also critical about the school approach, they stuck with it and succeeded within the system. Both groups felt that rather than solely focusing on points acquisition, post-primary education should 'be more rounded' (Fiona 3TE) and teach 'life skills' (Nadine 3TE).

In contrast, university learning was seen as highly independent, something that 'you do . . . on your own' (Alison 2SLA) and 'under your own steam' (Fiona 3TE). The freedom whether or not to attend sessions was repeatedly noted: if you did not go, 'no-one's asking any questions' (Paul 2SLA). Unmonitored, undirected, and relatively unsupported, one had to be 'self-geared in your learning' (Eileen 3TE). Learning was regarded as being for oneself and one's future, and this was an important motivating factor, as was the level of choice in all aspects of learning compared to school. University was seen as a space for understanding, interpreting, and developing one's ideas. For example, Fiona (3TE) noted the 'emphasis on approaching things with your own style and your own opinions . . . asking questions . . . making your own interpretations'.

Figuring out and enacting academic practice

Both groups reported similar academic experiences. They typically had poor attendance in first year, and some from both groups seriously considered dropping out[9] (often those with significant external foci, such as non-HE friendship groups,

and/or significant employment). Their attendance improved in second, and especially in third, year, during which time they perceived a 'step up' in what was expected of them and rising stakes with regard to their results. Both groups under-estimated the extent to which an independent approach was required and both were clear that they wanted additional academic support. Some participants in both groups encountered serious difficulties in first year and had experience of failing and having to repeat modules at various times. Typical difficulties included Mathematics- and/or Statistics-based aspects of subjects, assessment-related stress, managing workload, and academic writing. Participants bemoaned what they perceived as a lack of feedback to clarify where and why they had done well, or badly, and, importantly, to ascertain how exactly they could improve. As Alison (2SLA) commented, 'you just get your grade . . . I don't know what I did'.

In their transition to the independent learning approach of HE academic practice (constructing arguments in an academic fashion, drawing upon multiple sources, and, importantly, incorporating independent thought in an academic manner, as well as referencing requirements), the TEs struggled more than did the SLAs initially, and required significantly more 'deconstruction' from their dependent approach. Three discrete stages in the process were identified: regurgitating, experimental enacting, and stable enacting. Having had explicit instruction about the nature and process of academic practice during their access programme, most SLAs skipped stage one and moved directly to stage two, whereas the TEs experienced a major clash in academic culture and displayed a high level of confusion grappling with the transition. They talked about 'having one thing expected of you, and then the other thing, and being kind of confused' (Fiona 3TE). Eileen (3TE) explained that because 'you've been taught not to . . . deviate from the standard curriculum . . .' at school, students in first year were 'frightened to have your own opinion'. Their ability to see, understand and respond to new expectations was constrained by deeply ingrained habits learned and practised throughout post-primary level. One first had to '. . . unlearn the rigidness of school' (Eileen 3TE), and be 'deconstructed' (Fiona 3TE). Cognisant of what would be rewarded in assessment, their reaction was to revert to the approach successfully employed in school, that of 'regurgitating' material presented to them, by 'stick[ing] to their [lecturers'] structures' (Melanie 1TE) and 'emphasis[ing] . . . what they said' (Elizabeth 1TE). Nadine (3TE) observed that 'you don't know whether it's going to work in this situation, but it's all you know'. It was mostly TEs (usually at the beginning of, or throughout, first year) whose behaviour was characteristic of this stage. Others in this stage were those who had *regressed* from stage two, some of whom were SLAs.

In the second stage, participants were gaining some clarity about the nature and process of academic practice and experimented with incorporating their own views in assessment tasks. For the TEs this most frequently happened towards the end of first year, or in second year, while it occurred earlier in first year for the SLAs. Increasingly seeing a role for their own interpretation, they reported that 'they want you to . . . put in more of your own opinion' (Riona 1SLA). There was a burgeoning recognition that HE was about learning how to develop one's arguments, and that there was usually more than one 'right' way of going about things. Kenneth (2TE) explained that 'what third level education does for you . . . there is no exact right or wrong answer . . . It's how well you develop your point'. There was also an understanding that one's ideas and interpretations, while welcome and expected,

were to be 'substantiated' with academic references, and 'not regurgitated back' (Glenda 1SLA), although some were confused about why one had to 'find someone else's opinion that agrees with yours' (Kevin 2TE).

Progression to the third stage depended on the outcome of participants' experimentation *and* on their perception of what would be rewarded in terms of a specific assessment task.

Those who perceived that incorporating their own opinions had not been, or would not be, rewarded in assessment, regressed to the 'Regurgitating' stage, due to the 'risk' of losing marks. However, these participants' demonstrated confusion about what using one's own ideas really meant in (academic) practice, which led to them making unsuccessful, or inconsistently successful, attempts. Even when participants understood how to incorporate their own opinions in an academic fashion, it was their perception of *what would be rewarded in assessment* that determined the approach they ultimately took. Kenneth (2TE), for example, understood what was required and how to go about it, but the driving force behind his approach in each specific instance was his perception of what the lecturer wanted. He explained that his 'method' was to 'find out what the lecturer likes . . . and put it back at them', commenting that 'that's the best way to get marks'.

Where there was some clarity about how to incorporate one's opinion academically, *and* where this was seen to be rewarded in assessment, participants gained confidence and became skilled at academic practice over time, thus progressing to the 'Stable Enacting' stage. There was an alignment between their conception of and approach to learning, and their perception of what was required and rewarded. Participants understood that answers were more 'good' or 'bad'-in terms of being poorly or well argued, for example-than right or wrong, in line with the literature regarding epistemological development during the undergraduate years (Perry 1970). Citing and referencing practices were well integrated and there was a sense that education had broader goals, in terms of growing as a person, for example. Whilst it was mostly participants in third or final year who reached this stage, some were in second year, and for some, it did not happen until postgraduate level. Irrespective of the stage participants were at, where assessment was *examination*-based, the majority engaged in some level of rote-learning. Examinations were perceived as high-stakes events and participants felt it was too 'risky' not to memorise at least some material.

While at group level the SLAs experienced *slightly* more disrupted paths through HE than did the TEs, both groups achieved broadly similar final degree (or most recent – for those still in the system) results, with a small number of both groups achieving first class honours and 2.2s, and the majority of both groups achieving 2.1s. The majority of both groups are currently engaged in postgraduate study or plan to do so in the near future.

Impacting factors

Both groups' similar academic experiences and results may be partly explained by the various 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' balancing out. What the SLAs may have 'lacked' in academic self-confidence (see below) and previous experience of education, they may have made up for through explicit HE preparation and other supports during their access course. The SLAs reported being far more prepared for

HE than did the TEs. They directly linked this to their access course, noting they were not coming to university 'raw' or 'cold', but rather were 'hitting the ground running' (Paul 2SLA), and claiming they were *at an advantage* to others. In contrast, the TEs were 'overwhelmed' initially, feeling 'lost' and 'left to our own devices' (Liam 2TE). Both groups emphasised that school failed to prepare students for HE and pointed to the need to bridge the gap. Fiona (3TE) noted the irony of students learning to 'deconstruct' their school approach to learning while still at school. Participants believed that the lack of preparedness for HE could be remedied if the school approach changed. Importantly, they emphasised that it should be changed because independent learning and thinking had intrinsic value, and that a positive *attendant* outcome would be that students would be more prepared for HE.

The SLAs may also have been advantaged by having been less successful in the dependent school approach: they required less deconstruction and had fewer bad habits to 'unlearn' upon arrival in HE. Similarly, having so heavily engaged and been successful in the school system may have constituted something of a hindrance to the TEs upon progression to HE. Relative to the SLAs, they required more 'deconstruction' from the school approach, needed more time to 'unlearn' (Eileen 3TE) values and dependent ways of learning and thinking, and had much more to do in terms of 'stripping bad habits' (Derrick 3TE). Similarly, academics in Ireland have claimed that much of their work with first year students involves having to 'clean out the cupboards' (Keane 2006, 12), a sort of deconstruction of dependence.

The SLAs were, on the other hand, constrained by their lack of academic self-confidence. While the access course had helped them to become more confident, many were very stressed about their potential to cope academically. Glenda (1SLA) spoke of being 'panicky . . . anxious . . . doubting my capability'. Riona (1SLA) worried that she 'mightn't be able to do it'. Perceiving HE as their 'last chance', the high stakes for the SLAs compounded this stress. Their lack of academic self-confidence also manifested itself in a reluctance to 'disclose' their HE entry route to other students, worrying that they would be considered as not 'able' for university-level study. Lacking academic self-confidence led some SLAs to overwork and to ignore initial evidence that they were doing very well. Only with *repeated* 'evidence' (through results and feedback) did they begin to believe that they were 'able for it'. In contrast, the TEs did not express any concerns about their 'ability'; having done what they felt was a 'good' Leaving Certificate, they were confident about the academic challenge posed by university.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study challenge deficit assumptions about WP and 'falling standards' and raise important questions about the connections between approaches to learning, pedagogy and assessment at (and between) school and HE levels.

Differential preparedness and levels of academic self-confidence impacted upon participants' post-entry experiences. However, both groups' similar academic experiences and similar degree results[10] suggests that entering HE on lower than required points may not impact negatively on either the nature or level of academic difficulties encountered, or on the quality of one's final degree result. Their similar results also calls into question the assumption that achieving the requisite Leaving Certificate points is the most important predictor of HE achievement (Commission

on the Points System 1999), a belief also more recently questioned by the findings of Delaney, Harmon and Redmond (2010). It also 'undermines the rationale for A levels as unambiguous indicators of a fixed and permanent elite, and selection as a rational process', observes Williams (1997, 31), 'if failures at 18 are redefined as successes three years later'. Clearly, factors other than 'ability' influence achievement at school level. Unfortunately, the myth of meritocracy continues to pervade educational thinking in Ireland.

Whilst both groups were highly critical of the school learning ('read, remember, regurgitate') approach, the TEs' affirming experiences generally meant that they remained engaged and achieved to the requisite level. In contrast, some of the SLAs withdrew, in some way, from education and the learning approach was a major contributory factor. It is important to note that it is the system, which is heavily focused on points acquisition in the Leaving Certificate examination, that fosters this approach. There are, of course, many teachers who strive to develop their pupils' capacities for self-directed learning and critical thinking. However, the system constrains such efforts, and it is entirely understandable that teachers may feel pressurised to engage in an approach which the system apparently readily rewards. Unfortunately, as this study has shown, students may then have to be deconstructed from the dependence learnt at school upon arrival in HE. Both groups of participants were clear that independent learning at school ought to be fostered, not only because it would result in students being more prepared for HE, but because such an approach had intrinsic value. The recently published National Strategy for Higher Education (The Strategy Group and the DES 2011) also considers serious reform at post-primary level[11] to be the key to better preparing students for HE. Pending this, however, the Strategy suggests focusing on developing generic academic skills ('self-directed learning, time-management, information literacy and critical analysis', ibid. 55) in first year in HE. However, international best practice is clear that embedding 'study skills' into academic programmes in a *discipline-specific* fashion is preferable to generic 'disembodied skill programs' (Clerehan 2002, 77). The SLAs in this study felt that their access course was a very good preparation for HE and that it, or aspects of it, should be offered to *all* new undergraduates.

A significant problem for some of this study's participants was not understanding the rationale for, or the process of, various aspects of academic practice, which, as Lillis and Turner (2001) argue, are neither transparent nor easily understood by students. Being explicit about what discipline-specific academic practices 'look like' would involve modeling, and providing a rationale for, their usage (cf. Haggis 2006; Northedge 2003). Resistance may arise as a result of the challenge of articulating the process and rationale (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Turner 2001) and because such an approach may be construed as 'spoon-feeding', and thus as lowering standards. However, rather than 'dumbing down' content, *making process explicit* through modeling good practice is arguably an intrinsic aspect of good teaching. Resistance may also be due to there being a lack of agreement about these processes amongst academics themselves (Lillis 2001). In any case, reform would necessitate significant academic staff development and ongoing investment of time by individual academics. Further, as the findings of this study have demonstrated, while understanding academic practice is necessary, students need to perceive that a particular practice will be rewarded in assessment in order to enact it. The impact of student perception of assessment on approach to learning has been documented (cf. Biggs 1999; Ramsden

2003). If we want students to be independent and critical thinkers, this needs to be apparent in learning outcomes, assessment requirements and marking schemes. Again, significant investment in (discipline-specific) academic staff development to consider the theory and practice of these issues-as well as the purpose of assessment-is implicated.

How we might better support working class students' confidence levels also requires attention. Were the SLAs in this study more confident from the beginning, and if they had had a greater sense of 'fitting in' socially (Keane 2011), they may have achieved even more highly. The TEs' high level of confidence led to a 'seamless' (Reay et al. 2001) and 'fish in water'-type (Bourdieu 1989) experience. In line with the literature, the SLAs' inability to believe that they were 'good enough' despite evidence, and their sense of being undeserving compared to those entering HE through traditional routes, suggests an internalisation of beliefs about working-class inferiority (cf. Bufton 2003; Burke 2002; Crozier et al. 2008; Haggis and Pouget 2002; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Lynch and O'Riordan 1998). Central to this perception of inferiority is an assumption about being inadequately intelligent (cf. Bufton 2003; Burke 2002; Skeggs 1997), which for the SLAs was very much rooted in their school experiences, particularly in their interactions with teachers. Further work is needed to develop teachers' critical understanding of the relationship between education, equality and social justice, and specifically the link between factors such as social class and achievement, the role of teacher expectations and practices such as 'ability' grouping (cf. NCCA 2007).

This study suggests the need for significant system-wide change, including assessment (particularly in terms of the current points system, due to its backwash effect on pedagogy), and teacher and academic staff development. The latter ought to include a focus on examining assumptions about and (academic) expectations of different student groups at school and HE levels, and the design and implementation of pedagogy and assessment which is more explicit about discipline-specific processes, and which fosters and rewards independent and critical thinking.

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Notes

1. In this Irish context, 'points' are based on students' performance in the Irish terminal school examination, the 'Leaving Certificate'.
2. See http://www.ncca.ie/en/Consultations/ for information about major curriculum consultations and redevelopment.
3. Round two was conducted with 21 of the original 45 participants.
4. For information about participants' socioeconomic status, see Keane (2011, 2009b).
5. A 'match' for one male Commerce first-year student was not found.
6. A pseudonym. Pseudonyms are also employed throughout in relation to student participants.
7. Similar to the UK's 'post 1992' universities.

8. The number refers to the year group of the participant at the time of that particular interview.
9. One TE student withdrew, having failed his first-year examinations. No SLA withdrew, but one transferred to a part-time degree option.
10. Admittedly, the sample (45 students) in this study is very small to be considering patterns of academic achievement, and, of course, this was not the purpose of the study.
11. Specific preparation at school level is also being considered. A unit as part of the Transition Year programme in schools, entitled 'Exploring Options in Further and Higher Education', developed by the HEA and NCCA, was launched in September 2010 (available at: http://www.hea.ie/en/node/1299). However, while the unit explores several important issues, it does not include explicit preparation for the approach to learning in HE.

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