The Outlooks of International Students when Immersed in an Irish Higher Education Setting

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Abstract

Ireland's history of education for understanding internationalisation in education is important. The country once used English as a second language but was provoked by famine and opportunity to gradually shift to be an English speaking country. The impacts of this language on Ireland have been profound, and discussion in this analysis establishes how the nation viewed education as a means of opportunity. In the 20th Century, Ireland developed rapidly following membership of the OECD and the EU. Notably, as Ireland modernised it responded to international commonalities, while higher education and participation in the EHEA made Ireland transition to be a more competitive producer of education.

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) impacted Ireland in unprecedented ways. Ireland had been preparing to engage in greater internationalisation in higher education, until economic catastrophe expediated this process. A series of policy changes were implemented in this era signalling widespread reform to meet the requirements of the Bologna Process and economic restrictions. In 2010 and 2016, Irish strategies for internationalisation were revealed. These strategies are critiqued, and a thorough understanding of their outcomes and expectations is considered. Linguistic imperialism is applied to comprehend and establish aspects such as Irish government's interpretation of global citizenship, which influences the strategies.

An interpretivist paradigm guides data collection of semi-structured interviews which analyse the experiences students from China. The significance of the data collected for this study comes from providing Chinese students in Ireland an opportunity to share their experiences and to have a voice in discussions on internationalisation. Five themes emerged from the data: experiences; being a Chinese student in Ireland; role of the university; social networks; career benefits. The penultimate discussion and analysis show the presence of student agency in almost every action carried out. Agency was analysed and discussed in relation to students attempts to become more independent, their need for transferable experiences, and establishing a sense of belonging. Currents mechanisms for assessing students' progress and supporting life and learning in Ireland appear inadequate and in need of revision.

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Figures and tables

Abbreviations

DES – Department of Education and Skills

DFAT – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

DFHE – Department of Further and Higher Education

ECB – European Central Bank

EEA – European Economic Area

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

EHEA – European Higher Education Area

ERASMUS - European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

EU – European Union

FDI – Foreign Direct Investment

GFC – Global Financial Crisis

HCT – Human Capital Theory

HE – Higher Education

HEA – Higher Education Authority

HEI – Higher Education Institute

HETAC - Higher Education Training and Awards Council

IEGC – *Irish Educated, Globally Connected: an International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020*

IGR – Investing in Global Relationships: Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-15

IHEQN - Irish Higher Education Quality Network

IMF – International Monetary Fund

NUI – National University of Ireland

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

RTC – Regional Technical College

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

UCD – University College Dublin

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation

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Author's Declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

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Introduction

Internationalisation in higher education is a global phenomenon. The sector is characterised by student mobility, where millions of students travel to different countries for educational purposes. The stakeholders within this realm practice with the knowledge that there are great advantages, as well as risks (Hugonnier, 2020). These opportunities and pressures can be relevant to all who operate in this globalised sector.

Ireland has actively participated in globalised higher education for many years. Through participation in the European Union and OECD, Ireland has shown its commitment to the many educational, social, and economic policies which these organisations prioritise. In an attempt to be gain more influence in this area, Ireland has invested in developing significant resources and policy to exploit international education market. This was expediated at the outset of the global financial crisis, and has continued as an important feature of Irish higher education since. Throughout Ireland's expansion of its international education product, an increased number of international students have arrived to study in Ireland. Despite this, policy has made few adaptations to the product of international education available. In conjunction, only minimal exploration of the lives of students has been conducted. This dissertation explores the lived experiences of students who choose Ireland and offers and interpretation of experiences which shape their education.

A historical narrative of the development of Irish education begins *Chapter 1: The Historical Impact of Education in Ireland*. From the nineteenth century, where the origins of Irish universities and usage of the English language are explored. Both elements are key to understanding the background to Irish higher education, and highlight the distinct nature of education in Ireland. Exploring the growth and expansion of Ireland's education sector in the twentieth century further examines the globalising factors involved. It can be seen that Irish education and policy makers were heavily impacted by the input and influence of international organisations.

In *Chapter Two: Internationalisation in Higher Education as a Global Phenomenon*, a relevant discussion on the definition of internationalisation in higher education is held, where it is determined that internationalisation is both a process and a reaction. This means that internationalisation is ongoing and developing, while also reacting to changes and factors beyond each provider, be it institution or state. This chapter concludes with an analysis and evaluation of the extent of internationalisation in the United Kingdom and Australia, which contextualises the policy setting which Irish international education is situated.

Internationalisation in Ireland is examined in detail in *Chapter Three: Internationalisation of Higher Education in Ireland*. The processes which enabled more internationalisation in education were modified and the process of attracting more students was accelerated. Following the Global Financial Crisis, the need to support Irish higher education was pertinent, and universities and colleges were required to become more independent when funding their activities. International education strategies launched to support the education sector in Ireland prioritised attracting more students, but also building the facilities and structures to accommodate more students. The analysis of internationalisation policy through a linguistic imperialism lens will evaluate the construction of policy, and present an understanding of the ways that policy in international education is expected to function. These steps are analysed and critiqued to establish the definition of success which the government proposed.

In *Chapter Four: Methodology* and *Chapter Five: Methods*, explanations of the methodology and methods for the collection of data is provided. To begin, the research questions shall be presented. Subsequently, these chapters explain that this research seeks to analyse the lived experiences of students who are attracted to Ireland as a result of the resources and policies developed. Through semi-structured interviews, data gathered for this analysis attempt to understand how students' outlooks are influenced while living and studying in Ireland. Research evaluates the extent to which other factors or stakeholders interact.

In *Chapter Six: Presentation of Findings*, an extensive evaluation of the research data is presented through thematic analysis. Five themes which emerged from the

data are explored. The themes which are explored are *Experiences*, *Being a Chinese student in Ireland*, *The role of the university*, *Social networks*, and *Career benefits*. From these themes, elements which determine how international students continue within Irish higher education are presented. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts offers extant details on many factors which influence the ways which students persevere and thrive in Irish higher education.

Chapter Seven: Analysis of Findings explores the relevance of agency as a factor in the lived experiences of international students in Ireland. Agency is defined and explored for connections between the students who participated in this research and its role in dictating and influencing actions and decisions. This chapter shows students are active agents who make attempts to achieve objectives based on their initial expectations and preferred outcomes. Students complete agentive acts in challenging circumstances, such as hostile academic settings where minor language errors can be destabilising, or cases where it is extremely difficult to build lasting relationships with domestic students. Such examples are extensive, but they are discussed openly. The expectations is that student voices within this research can reinforce discussions regarding internationalisation and students from overseas in Ireland

In the final chapter, *Chapter Eight: Conclusions*, answers in the form of references to the research questions are offered. Additionally, the impact of this project on the researcher's practice, and suggestions for changes in Irish universities are offered. These sections offered a clear summary and encourage thoughtful reflection on the future of research in internationalisation in Irish higher education. The contribution to knowledge is evaluated, and suggestions for the future of research in this important sector are proposed. The final culmination of this research projected offers a suitably detailed review of the research, and encourages continued engagement in higher education in Ireland.

Prelude

Personal motivation to research internationalisation in Irish higher education

i Beginning my learning journey

As a professional in internationally focused education since 2005, the need to understand the causes, reasons, and motivations for the industry I have been employed in has been a priority. International themes have grown in prominence in education, but comprehending the extent of the success of Ireland's internationalisation strategies is an uncertain exercise. I have attempted to create a narrative which addresses this setting by communicating the voices of students set as the priority. For these reasons, the journey of learning through this doctoral project has been the culmination of professional, educational, and social growth.

To introduce this research, it is important that the author and researcher justifies exploration of the topic. My personal background reveals my authority as a professional who is committed to a deep understanding of a highly topical and ever expanding field of global education. It serves to emphasise the empathy which has guided and encouraged the need to address the issues which the research is intent on revealing.

As a narrative, this lived experience aspires to the temporality which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) see in all events, be they over a short period or a long period of time. The past and present lead to an implied future. Within this narrative are the people involved, the actions that result in outcomes, and that each event is tentative and uncertain and is dependent on interpretations. These factors exist within their own contexts which allow for the stories within this narrative to develop and for understanding to delve. Driving and steering this narrative

exploration is a curiosity which moves from childlike to intellectual, examining beyond the subtle differences to explore realities. To defer to Dewey (1991), who states 'the teacher has usually more to learn than to teach' (p.33).

i.i Korea

When I was in my final year completing my undergraduate degree in University College Dublin (UCD), I was struggling with coming to terms with a future in the world of work. On a damp winter afternoon, I shuffled into the large O'Reilly Hall convention facility in UCD's Belfield campus to attend a jobs fair hoping that I could remedy this. I was greeted by options like trainee solicitor, accountancy, and other assorted graduate recruiters all bedecked with glossy and dynamic hoardings designed to convey the recruiting company's identity. My options did not feel promising.

Two ladies dressed in bright and colourful gowns stood at a bare brown table in a corner of the hall. The ladies in their traditional dress were advertising the opportunity to Irish graduates to come to South Korea to teach English for a year. The prospect seemed positive – here was a job with chance to save some money, and to travel. South Korea held the opportunity of independence, experience, and the chance to craft something of myself. This option was promising.

After graduation I moved to Korea for my first full-time job and also the beginning of my career in globalised education. The experiences and knowledge earned were embodied by the country I lived, but this understanding provided a restricted perspective. English language learning had seemingly captured a regions attention to the extent it was referred to as 'English mania' (Park & Abelmann, 2004). The origins and motivations for this seemed ambiguous, but I would soon learn that Korea was not alone in this fascination and obsession with acquiring the language.

i.ii Why international students?

The motivation to carry out this research project on the outlooks of international students in Ireland was initially personal. It has roots in my experiences of teaching and travelling overseas for my first teaching job, and the subsequent life I made for myself. The motivation has transpired from a need to provide essential knowledge

to clarify the ambiguities observed in globalised education, but to do so while guided by the empathy fostered in my own professional experiences.

Many have felt the necessity to venture far beyond their home country's borders to attempt to satisfy their ambitions. In such journeys, identities and perspectives are shaped by the emotions and experiences encountered. I left home to the uncertainty of an unfamiliar destination and concerns about trying to do a new job I was ill equipped for. The emotions and thoughts helped me to comprehend the mindset of students' arriving in Ireland to commence a degree. My insights could allow for an empathic and considerate approach which prioritised offering a voice to the international students who chose to study in Irish higher education institutes. I allow empathy to guide my research. Empathy, defined as seeing yourself in someone else's shoes, has made me ask questions of students from overseas about their choice of study location and the lifestyles they live while studying.

Students from overseas are willing participants in a system shaped by global political and economic factors which are indicative of a globalised higher education ecosystem. For students, the importance of choice in internationalised education cannot be understated, but it is also important to point to an already well-developed system for accepting students from overseas.

Typical experiences of choosing to study overseas are good examples. Applicants can freely email course or programme directors, read the latest course descriptions, attend education fairs, evaluate competing prospectuses through various portals, and all before they arrive in the host nation. To assist, international rankings can be consulted to reassure applicants of the quality of their chosen course or university. All of this can be completed using a smartphone. This route has been the case for many years. Even in the case of my applications for masters and doctoral education I applied entirely online and received my confirmation though the same means. On a personal level, international study is attractive as it offered greater variety of study options, more high quality universities to choose from, and a chance to obtain something different than was available to peers in my

home country. Today, thousands of students making significant investments in their education take similar steps.

Like many, the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC) has been a factor. In 2010, in the midst of economic upheaval, I was in Korea working in a large university and felt the need to help Ireland. I tried to understand the role I could play in encouraging Koreans to consider Ireland as a destination for their overseas education. South Koreans were a significant investor in international education, with some of the largest numbers of students globally travelling to pursue their education overseas, consisting of 4.4% of all incoming international students from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member states (OECD 2010). Prior to this, the extent of internationalisation in higher education had not been obvious. It struck me that Ireland could conceivably absorb some of this large market as, while a small country, it had many attractive facets such as its European Union membership and the fact that English was the language spoken.

I understood Ireland to be a relatively unknown and unexplored country with a very small footprint in East Asia. In a saturated international education market, value could be found if Ireland could carve out its niche. It is funny, as at the same time the Irish government launched the first policy to attract international students to Ireland using very similar language and thinking.

i.iii Do students want to study in Ireland?

It is frequently felt by Irish people that Ireland is a wonderful country, and everyone loves the Irish. This is a commonly held consensus and I think I have grown up reiterating this in streets, cafes, and bars around the world since I can recall. With each reiteration, this belief has been shared by all in attendance.

When you travel overseas and find yourself in less familiar environments, such as South Korea, the fairer aspects of the national personality are less familiar. It can come as shock that even the country itself is not so well known, and famed exports are thought to be German, and celebrities from the United Kingdom. Conversations in those early days of living overseas told me that Ireland was not as familiar a spot as Ireland had informed me.

Returning to Ireland in 2014, I worked in numerous internationally focused education settings across in Dublin. I encountered an alternative to what I had experienced in Korea. I met students who had sold their belongings in their home country and quit their job to be in Ireland, or students who shared a bedroom with four other people and worked a nightshift in a chain supermarket to pay for day to day expenses. The motivations and pressures that could drive a person to go to this extent, or in some cases even more, solely to experience studying English in Ireland allowed for an instant reappraisal of how I understood education as a globalised system. The English language was at its centre, but it was only an attractive feature, and the ability to acquire higher education qualifications while studying through English was of greater value.

If Ireland sought to attract more international students, distinct and diligent efforts to improve the educational and national profile of Ireland was required. To do effectively requires a considered evaluation of the lived experiences of the students who chose to come to Ireland to study in the universities. This initiative would need to be taken and as an ambitious and thoughtful doctoral student, I saw potential in asking questions which had yet to be proposed. This dissertation is my answer to those questions.

Chapter 1

The Historical Impact of Education in Ireland

The nature of a university has its origins in the acquisition and sharing of knowledge, which has been developed in an international realm. The growth of higher education through universities, colleges or academies across the world has been a cumulative process. In Ireland, university and national education represent a period of development which coincides with the growth of national identity.

1.1 The Irish University

Europe's first university was established in Bologna in the 11th century and from here, Europe's long tradition of learning in collegial settings began. Ireland, which lay beyond the borders of the Roman empire, experienced its own scholarly genesis under Christianity, and Irish monks founded monasteries in Ireland and overseas throughout the middle ages. One scholarly achievement was the production of what some regard as Ireland's greatest treasure, the Book of Kells, from the ninth century. However, it is believed that the Book of Kells was mostly crafted in an Irish monastery in Scotland (Kearney, 2016). Scholarly traditions flourished in Ireland until the arrival of Viking, Norman and English kings who changed the lay of the land and the rule of law, and the country would need to wait some time before new centres of learning grew.

1.1.2 Founding Irish Universities

When English rule extended across the island in the sixteenth century, Dublin grew as a commercial and administrative hub for the various plantations which would constitute the increased sphere of influence. As Irish society developed and became wealthier and more complex, the necessity for higher levels of learning was felt. *The King's Inns*, founded in 1541 to train Dublin's legal professionals, and later,

Ireland's first full university, *Trinity College Dublin,* in 1592, were indicative of a burgeoning trend as European monarchs recognised the need for increased professional expertise and knowledge to administer their territory. *Trinity College Dublin*, considered one of the so-called 'ancient' universities, had an important influence on the makeup of Irish higher education in later years. *Trinity College Dublin* would remain a symbol of the elite in Ireland, and the university was long considered to be a preserve of land owning, positioned and Church of Ireland class in Ireland (Coolahan, 2017). In the 19th century, the role and function of the university began to change, and in Ireland, this would take a particular direction due to the historical and cultural character of the country.

1.1.3 Religion in Early Irish Higher Education

The role of religion in Irish education is significant. *Trinity College Dublin*, noted as it was, was renowned in Ireland as a Protestant university, and all aspects of this institution were deemed 'repugnant' to Catholics, and the clergy in Ireland forbade Catholics from attending (Coolahan, 2017). In the 19th century, a demand for new centres of higher learning was present, and to accede to the demand, the Queen's Colleges were established in 1845 in Belfast, Cork and Galway. These new institutions were founded on the premise they were non-denominational, independent and utilitarian (Walsh, 2018), but in practice this may have been different. In response, the *Catholic University* was established, with Cardinal Newman, the liberal education theorist, its first rector. The *Catholic University* began small but would soon grow substantially and gain notoriety when renamed *University College Dublin*, and later, *Trinity College*'s rival. For the *Catholic University*, Newman envisaged a liberal institute focused on the cultivation of knowledge along with religious and theological knowledge, or universal knowledge, which encompassed all aspects of learning (Walsh, 2018).

Ireland was presented with two presiding ideas of the purpose of a university. One was secular, utilitarian, functional and necessary for the economic development of Ireland. The second was viewed as a means of learning for intellectual and spiritual growth and considered to be in the best interests of the populace by the Catholic Church. Within the increasingly complicated social and economic landscape, the

universities were an important issue because establishing them was not solely an educational exercise but one which prioritised political, economic and religious objectives (Coolahan, 2008). Most importantly, much of Ireland was a country which was impoverished and ravaged by famine and emigration but from here, the Irish university began to slowly grow.

1.1.4 Why a University in Ireland?

Universities were seen to have political, economic and social importance across society. Coolahan (2008) suggests that Ireland's interests arose from a rising international trend which saw greater interest in providing higher levels of instruction to a more diverse body of the population. The international nature of Ireland's new universities may not have been clear at the time, as Ireland was part of the kingdom of Great Britain.

Newman's interpretation of the university was new to Ireland but the Queen's Colleges' were also. These were an attempt to replicate the *University of London,* which used Von Humboldt's ideas for the organisation of German higher education institutes. Education was a way of approaching the challenges which an industrialised society faced (Walsh, 2018). It does not go unobserved that Ireland was far from an industrialised society, and its immediate problems may not have aligned with either viewpoint. However, these changes are important, and we should look to this era of university growth with Lyons' (1973) assessment in mind; the national crisis imposed by widespread famine and emigration caused a psychological shift, and this made Britain's previous domestic issue an international issue. In the future, solutions would be sought by both government and population, and these solutions would come from abroad.

The foundation of the Irish university was representative of Irish society at the time. There was a distinct political climate emerging in Ireland which would begin a violent but largely successful revolutionary battle for independence, and the new university was emblematic of this period. The distinct cultural nature of Ireland, which was drawn along distinct political and religious lines, is important. Throughout the 19th century, the issue of the Irish university persisted, and is even reputed to have forced the fall of the Gladstone government in 1873. In 1908, the

National University of Ireland (NUI) was amalgamated from the renamed *University College Dublin* (formerly Catholic University of Ireland), *University College Cork*, and *University College Galway*. In Belfast, *Queen's University* received its own independent university status, thus quelling unionist concerns. While formally nondenominational, the arrangements were satisfactory to Catholic Bishops in the south and the Presbyterian community in Ulster. Both *National University of Ireland* and *Queen's University* proved robust, and the general structure remains to this day. This durable settlement has lasted through the 20th century, surviving independence and EU memberships as examples of tests of their resolve. As a young Irish nation began to form, the new institutions required to define itself were born. While Ireland would remain agrarian and highly dependent on Britain and both churches for some time, universities on the island of Ireland were an important exercise in preparing the country for the future.

1.2 The Origins of English Language in Ireland

From the 19th century, as industrialisation and new political identities became established across Europe, education was being seen in a new light (Coolahan, 2017). It was now an aspect of society which was considered an area of social, economic and political importance by key stakeholders in Irish society. The gradual establishment of universities in Ireland, in ways, was initially mirrored by the steady increase in national schools across communities. However, the wider impact of national school education in 19th century Ireland was significant, with lasting impacts.

The establishment of a national school system provided important education for a rural population. Also, national schools contributed to greater use of English in Irish communities, and especially rural areas. They also attempted to influence the social fabric of Ireland by reducing the impact of religious faith and providing a means for upward mobility. Contemporary evidence explains increases in participation in primary and secondary school as indicators for improvements in social and economic well-being (Global Monitoring Report, 2015). In Ireland, greater availability of primary schooling led to increased demands for education or societal

progress, while those more advantaged looked towards further or higher means of education.

1.2.1 The Stanley Letter

Education in Ireland during the 19th century had been reappraised, and its function was certainly more political, with long-term impacts which are important to this study. Education through English was introduced in Ireland when the *Stanley letter* launched a national school system in 1831. The new legislation sought to formalise the learning structures and materials, but the schools still required the support of local communities to practise. Lyons and Moloney (2019) suggest that the provision of this new education was a genuine attempt to provide education, and the priorities of the new school system were to help foster law-abiding citizens. This did not result in an immediate shift to English speaking or usage in Ireland, as various factors impacted immediate uptake or usage of English. In many largely Irish-speaking communities, learning through English was a challenge (Wolf, 2014), but despite complications, the schools began to grow and with them, literacy in English increased. Prior to this, an extended history of the English crown's attempts to implement controls existed (Wolf, 2014), but this was hindered by the Irish populations' ability to function within the state's bureaucracy but also restrict its influences.

1.2.2 Famine and Social/Political Upheaval

The impact of the famine in the middle of the 19th century resulted in extensive poverty and brought widescale emigration across the country. Hundreds of thousands of Irish were forced to look for opportunities either overseas or in urban centres. Crowley (2016) sees this as accelerating a process where English culturally superseded Irish, leaving the native language a stigmatised form. Daniel O'Connell, the MP who fought for and delivered Catholic voting rights, felt that the extinction of Irish would not be regrettable (Crowley, 2016; Wolf, 2014), while the Catholic hierarchy viewed English as more palatable because of the utility which the language possessed. While new, the national schools provided parents with an outlet to equip their children with the language required in Britain and America. While genuine concerns regarding the erosion of linguistic heritage and diversity

exist, the people who were impacted by social and economic pressures gradually chose to use English, and the result was a nation which soon saw English held with greater status and prestige (Crowley, 2016). It became dominant across many aspects of life, including religion, education, economics and politics. Importantly, the English language gave Ireland an opportunity in a time of great difficultly and uncertainty.

Lougheed (2018) points to the larger political role of national schools in the 19th century. Change was pressing, and the English language had already reached a particular prestige amongst the middle classes (Crowley, 2016). Events such as the famine, emigration and heightened nationalist politics focused the need to use English effectively. National schools were important in helping change the mentality of the population to see the Irish language as an indicator of poverty or inferiority. This was only partly reversed in the early 20th century as a means of instilling a sense of national identity (Walsh, 2016). By then, English had become the spoken language of the Irish nation.

1.3 Irish Education in the 1960s

The structures and design of Ireland's universities and national school system experienced minimal changes from their establishment through the period of independence and up until the end of World War 2. The post-war period in Europe saw an urgent need to respond economically in reaction to the widespread damage caused during the war. The United-States-led Marshall Plan sought to rejuvenate Western Europe through aid and investment. In Ireland, the economy and national outlook maintained a protectionist approach with high levels of emigration to Britain and the United States, and a focus on agriculture (Barry, 2007). The post-war era signified a gradual change in mentality and the consideration of new perspectives, noted by Ireland's shift to attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and cooperation with the World Bank (Coakley, 2016). One factor considered advantageous was that Irish people used English, which had benefits, but Barry (2007) says that the uncovering of attracting FDI as an economic solution was 'stumbled upon' (p. 263). Irrespective of new approaches, the country's education

system remained under-developed, and the overall level of education for the population was low.

1.3.1 Irish Education and the Economy

Ireland's economy still relied heavily on agriculture, and second-level education was not attainable for all. The previous 30 years of statehood had perpetuated an ideal which saw the catholic and rural traditions dominate, and this was especially the case in education (Clarke, 2016).

Changes can be noted in a shift towards prioritisation of education's social and economic role from the late 1950s onward. McManus (2016) saw the government, at the time, had actively tried to reform education, but the process itself faced difficulties. At the beginning of the 1960s, the level of participation in secondary school was as low as 52% of all 15-year-olds and 25% of 17-year-olds (Clarke, 2010), with a total of less than 90,000 children in secondary school altogether (Clarke, 2016). Despite this, Clarke (2014) saw Ireland in the 1960s seeking to change how education was viewed from one of a means of cultural and religious transmission to a system which placed personal development and economic preparation as priorities. If the intention was to attract foreign direct investment from manufacturers in the United States seeking to expand their operations in Europe, Ireland saw itself in an advantageous position as an English-speaking country.

In the early 1960s, global competitiveness entered a new realm. In 1961, the OECD was established, and Ireland was one of the founding members. This action had a prompt and lasting impact on Irish education by not only making its systems open to comparison and analysis, but also by announcing that it was willing to participate as an independent state in the global economy.

This coincided with an accelerated space race with the launch of Sputnik 1, which helped decide the changing focus and impetus of western education. Walsh (2016) asserts this signalled the beginning of the expansive approach of western education, with the OECD playing a key role in this new drive. Raising the quality of educational and scientific output was essential to competing against the perceived

technical superiority of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. These reasons saw Human Capital Theory (HCT) become increasingly popular amongst elites.

1.3.1.1 Human Capital Theory in Irish Higher Education

The presence of HCT was relatively new to Irish education, and especially to higher education. At the root, HCT is an economic assessment of an individual's value to the economy, and this value can be determined by the ability to fulfil functions which may benefit the economy. Human capital is a tradable commodity in the eyes of those who penned the defining strengths and characteristics, and investment in education can be considered the fulcrum by which it operates (Olssen, Codd and O'Neill, 2004). HCT is tied closely to higher education as universities or other HEIs can help to increase the value of individuals by providing targeted training or learning which helps to improve the economy by providing services or completing necessary job functions in industry or other areas. Maringe (2015) summarises HCT in higher education as a public and personal investment, which allows for education to be considered valuable for the economy, while also suggesting financial benefit to individuals who invest in education for their career. In Ireland, HCT was looked on favourably as a new opportunity to drive progress.

As an early member of the OECD, and later the European Economic Community (EEC), Ireland was acting like a nation aware of a shifting global mindset. Participation shows Ireland was keen to impress itself upon the world through global partnership and cooperation, but more so because of its embracing of human capital theory. Loxley, Seery and Walsh (2014) point to the dramatic change in outlook across Irish education, especially in universities, where science and technology emerged as dominant subjects in educational debates. Educationalists failed to challenge these human capital theory ideas, and traditional views of education lost out to the rhetoric which reinforced the approach. In time, strategies reinforced by HCT became expected across Irish education.

Membership of the OECD allowed for closer awareness of global trends and approaches. However, this needed to be bolstered by an educated workforce capable of meeting the demands new policy would expect. The political position of Minister for Education found new prestige in government, where previously the role

was cast as a liaison between stakeholders in the education system, notably the Catholic and Protestant churches. Now, education was to be an intrinsic component of national economic policy.

1.3.2 The New Outlook to Education - Donogh O'Malley

The Irish government viewed this new appreciation for higher education with responsibility and enthusiasm. Donogh O'Malley, T.D. and Minister for Education, who led numerous educational reforms, in ways, defined this new outlook. O'Malley, who also introduced free secondary schooling in Ireland, appears to have taken his chance when it came and even attempted to amalgamate *UCD* and *Trinity College*. In the 1960s, Ireland was criticised heavily by OECD investigators for the poor state of education, and particularly higher education (Walsh, 2011). Even at that time, Irish higher education had been described by Breatnach *et al*. (1968) as a 'congeries of distinct and disparate bodies of diverse origins and constitutions which perform a variety of uncoordinated and overlapping functions'" (p. 5). With increasing numbers of students attracted to higher education, critics also recognised the necessity for Ireland's universities to keep to international standards or else they may 'wilt and wither' (Breatnach *et al.*, 1968, p.30). O'Malley was willing to modernise an ailing and out-of-date system to one which was more modern and progressive.

1.3.2.1 International Students in the 1960s

O'Malley saw the value of foreign students for both their benefit to Irish education, and also because Ireland was obliged to educate people from overseas (O'Malley, 1967). It was believed that education could help countries like Ireland to develop, 'in accord with the best of Irish traditions' (O'Malley 1967, p. 167), and Ireland should seek to offer its universities to people who could not access satisfactory skills and training. O'Malley's views here sound wonderfully idealist and do not recognise that almost half a million people from a population of three million emigrated from Ireland in the previous decade (Barry, 2007). Discussing the funding of higher education in a period of great change in Irish education, O'Malley saw Irish education as an opportunity for all, regardless of where students came from. He felt that foreign students should pay no more than Irish students for their

education in Irish universities. This is a traditional view of the role and purpose of universities attracting international students. Altbach and Knight (2007) describe this perspective as one which views the system not as one for profit generation, but as a service solely focused on enhancing the education of all students.

1.3.3 Irish Universities in the 1960s

Higher education shifted during the 1960s to become an important tool of government policy with significant economic influence. Government accepted that higher education was essential to the social and economic development of Ireland and considered the universities' larger role in the future (Coolahan, 2017). This changed relationship strengthened the position of higher education, where before, its influence had been limited and non-progressive. At this point, Irish universities had become overcrowded and still functioned as they had since the NUI was formally established at the beginning of the century. The main problem was that there was no base of technical knowledge to support growth requisite to meet the needs of FDI (Barry, 2007). Namely, there was limited historical industrialisation but also a critical dearth in vocational and higher education. The new direction saw an almost instant increase in investment, with a 37% increase in funding between 1959 and 1960 (Walsh, 2014). In addition to capital projects and investment, key organisational changes were implemented in this period. The establishment of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 1968 centralised the management of Irish higher education. The organisation functions as a predominantly administrative apparatus with significant sway in government policy-making as it operated as a lobby for higher education in the Dáil, Europe and the media (Walsh, 2014). Its influence and relevance to contemporary issues in Irish higher education remains significant.

1.3.4 Investing in Education Report

Through participation in the OECD, Ireland showed its willingness to be open to new ideas for running the country. Where previously the Catholic Church had maintained strong control over social matters such as health and education, the state now wished to uphold its responsibility for the country's economic status, and this could be facilitated through OECD participation. One of the first and most influential

OECD educational investigations carried out was the 1965 report, *Investing in Education* (GoI,1965). This report recognised the economic value of Ireland's education through its labour force, both as highly qualified individuals and as speakers of English. There still remained major limitations.

Investing in Education confirmed the need for the education system to be capable of developing an internationally recognised workforce. Described by Walsh (2011) as a 'landmark in the transformation of the Irish education sector' (p. 367), the outcomes were not clear-cut. Hyland (2014) pointed to forces pressurising the Irish education system at that time, such as a traditional but elitist mentality in the Department of Education, and Clarke (2010) highlighted a less zealous approach by reforming ministers, as may be suggested elsewhere. Many ventures received slow and minimal uptake or limited approval by the general population, and the influence and control of the Catholic Church in social areas such as health and education remained integral.

The OECD report signalled a pragmatic shift in the way education was approached as it was the first rigorous statistical and policy-based analysis of the education system (Walsh *et al.*, 2014). As external stakeholders, the OECD are seen to exert 'rational peer pressure' (Ball, 2021, p.42) by influencing national governments on policy and management methods. In this case, OECD involvement exhorted Ireland to prioritise education as an economic necessity.

While the involvement of the OECD assisted in reforming Irish education, it is representative of an important change in perspective. Walsh (2011) notes that OECD presence indicated a greater willingness to accept outside influence on the way in which education was managed. *Investing in Education* signified two factors. Firstly, Ireland needed to modernise its education to compete globally. Secondly, the gradual compromise between stakeholders would help to realise the economic value of higher education.

1.4 Irish Higher Education and the Impact of the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy

Ireland's membership of the European Union (EU) is an integral element in the development of higher education. Membership has many requisites, but the scope of the organisation would be impossible for a small country, like Ireland, to match. EU membership meant gradual improvements across higher education, especially as funding was available for structural projects. This was assisted by a range of policy steps which had conveyed Ireland positively to investors, highlighting the continued but developing focus on FDI (Barry, 2014). Irish higher education became more integrated with other European higher education institutes and systems but was more attuned to the demands of investors.

As a signatory of the EU's Amsterdam Treaty in 1999, Ireland assented to the formalisation of international migration networks, especially for employment and education (Groake and Durst, 2018). A major change in the speed and direction of this process was Ireland's involvement in the Bologna Process in 1999, which was followed by the creation of the European Higher Education Authority (EHEA) and ratification of Europe-wide standards in both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The system which emerged allowed for closer participation in research networks and knowledge transfer. Through membership of the EU, Ireland agreed to the protocols of the Lisbon Strategy, which was convened by the European Commission. Both the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy have instituted significant change and reform of Irish higher education.

1.4.1 The Bologna Process

Participation in the Bologna Process indicated a willingness to actively and formally join in the broader internationalisation of higher education. The Bologna Process established a system of standardising awards and mobility across European higher and further education, as well as creating access to research funding more coherent. Prior to this, it was recognised that higher education in Ireland was not positioned to attract new research funding being made available by the EU. Gibson and Hazelkorn (2019) situate Bologna amidst a period of widespread higher

education reforms where decisions on its development were largely consensual. The implementation of Bologna was buttressed by policy moves, including the 1997 Universities Act which established a programme of standardising quality in higher education and allowed for easier accession of the expectations of the Bologna agreements. Ireland began to make changes to address its limitations and focused on opportunities available through participating in the structures and initiatives supported and promoted across Europe. While the various changes were helpful to Irish higher education, Bologna held a unique opportunity.

The Bologna Process allowed for a completely new focus for higher education in Ireland. The established view was that higher education benefitted Ireland's ability to attract FDI, and reform was viewed positively as an opportunity to maintain Ireland's competitiveness while remaining committed to European projects (Gibson and Hazelkorn, 2019). Prior to Bologna, Ireland lacked a reliable way of funding higher education and research, and student mobility was overlooked. A 1995 European Commission white paper, *Teaching and Learning Towards the Learning Society*, recognised that Europe required to reassess the importance of education in the face of increasing global internationalisation of economies (European Commission, 1995). Modernisation of Irish education was an urgent requirement. Many of Ireland's educational decisions were determined by the need to remain an economically competitive and attractive destination for FDI. Increased awareness of the rising scope of internationalisation and the relationship with education were now considered as key factors (Department of Education and Skills, 1995; Skilbeck, 2001). These directions would have aligned with both the objectives of the Bologna Process and also with the Lisbon declaration.

1.4.2 The Lisbon Strategy

The Lisbon Strategy (2000) outlined the necessity for responsive education policies to bolster further economic prowess and to facilitate knowledge economy strategies. To achieve this, it required that signatory states adhere to a particular set of objectives necessary for establishing Europe's status as a world-leading knowledge economy. From an education perspective, this allowed for access to lucrative research and development opportunities. Ireland's participation in the

Lisbon Strategy provided further motivation to participate in the wide-ranging modernisation of the European Union. Education situated itself logically within the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, while the EU gradually applied educational policy which supported its targets (Pépin, 2011). Through the Lisbon Strategy, the EU was attempting to build social and economic structures which could compete globally, specifically against the United States and China. An education system of homogenous awards was one area which presented opportunity and could be recognised around the world.

By aligning Irish higher education with the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, Irish universities attained a recognisable standard or quality on a global scale. These new approaches initiated a formalisation of relationships in European higher education and have greatly assisted the globalisation of higher education (de Wit, 2018). Bologna and the Lisbon Strategy provided a stable platform for higher education to increase its profile where previously it had limited influence. Importantly, Irish higher education was aligned with the European Union's attempt to be more globally competitive, and this is key to recognising the direction that Irish higher education takes in the future.

1.5 Higher Education in Ireland - From Modernisation to Internationalisation

Irish higher education's departure to implement internationalisation strategies was, in part, a response to the Bologna and Lisbon agreements, which increased the homogeneity of EU higher education. From 2000, Irish higher education was still small scale and modest with protections from state budgets, but change would be forced before long.

1.5.1 Attempts to Find New Directions for Higher Education

Formal projections were made to modernise and expand the scope and function of higher education. Activities included internationalising the universities by attracting international students, reforming funding structures to meet national priorities and achieving world class status for universities (Government of Ireland, 2007). An important factor in reform discussions was the call to increase the number of

international students in higher education. In 2004, the first report on internationalisation of higher education in Ireland was completed. *Internationalisation of Irish Education Services* (Department of Education and Skills, 2004) set out the advantages of the Irish education system relative to other competing systems and called for both regulation through quality assurance and immigration reforms. Additionally, the need for focused branding and marketing of Irish education overseas was expressed. The *Internationalisation of Irish Education Services* report provided a clear indication for the scope of internationalisation in higher education.

1.5.2 Awareness of International Ranking Systems for Universities

The *Internationalisation of Irish Education Services* report highlighted the economic value of internationalised higher education and positioned it as a lucrative and profitable industry (Department of Education and Skills, 2004). Hazelkorn (2008) addresses the underlying issues which were left from the DES report, pointing to the significance of wider awareness of global competition in the period. It should be noted that leadership in higher education was increasingly concerned with the impact of university ranking systems, which were viewed as a way of informing institutional reputation. Moreover, rankings appear to have an important role in attracting international research and for influencing government decision-making. Hazelkorn (2007) also asserts that rankings are:

> '[A] cue to consumers regarding the conversion potential of a qualification for occupational opportunities and personal attainment, […] a cue to employers about what they can expect from graduates, and a cue to government and policy makers regarding international standards and contribution to national innovations strategies". (p.3).

This analysis looks beyond the methodology employed to address the impact of these systems and addresses their function. They are not just for universities to celebrate but are also used by students and industry leaders when seeking partnerships. In Ireland, the priority which rankings took made newspaper headlines

when Dr Hugh Brady, then president of UCD, celebrated placement within the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings, expressing that global positions:

> 'matter when top-quality international students and staff are choosing a university, they matter increasingly to Irish students when deciding whether to study in Ireland or abroad, and they are cited as one of the top 10 reasons why multinational companies choose a particular region in which to invest' (Flynn, 2009).

The importance of connecting the process of attracting international students with bringing FDI to Ireland is equated by Dr Brady. That, he elaborates through emphasising the importance of stakeholders choosing these destinations, is equally valid. Sources contemporary to this period are clear on the relevance of international position, and reputation for Irish universities was as important then as it is now.

A new approach to considering internationalisation at this time was being considered. This approach focused on global positioning and reputation and looked to take advantage of the publicity which rankings could bring, but it would also attempt to protect against poor positioning. Of most relevance was that this approach appears to have been created to help universities to cope in a performance-driven market.

1.5.3 Internationalisation as Neoliberalism

Actions by the Irish government exemplified by the marketisation of state-financed resources, such as education, are characteristic of neoliberalism. Through policy, Ireland wished to market Irish education overseas on a large scale and in doing so, change the outlook for higher education in Ireland. The trade and promotion of education in Ireland, and especially overseas to non-European Economic Area (EEA) students, is an important aspect of the educational reforms where they were gradually being implemented. Mobility of students was one of the four key pillars of the Bologna agreements and had been indicated as necessary for higher education to succeed (DES, 2004). Ireland, an English-speaking country, was seen to be neglecting a source of income comparable with other English-speaking countries.

Internationalisation was to be considered an opportunity to source high-fee-paying students, among other advantages. This approach reclassified Irish higher education and is evidence of the incorporation of market strategies to attract private investment in the education 'industry'. Lynch (2006) calls the proliferation of these strategies as a threat to the 'core values that are central to university work' (p. 6), whereby the language of economic efficiency had infiltrated students', staff and academics' understanding of what it means to be a university. The discussion between the important economic function of universities and the role of the university as an institution of knowledge stretches back to the establishment of Ireland's universities in the 19th century.

Presently, we see education and training becoming related directly to the economic growth or development of the country. Successfully monetising education has become a national priority to achieve excellence and boost national competition. Filippakou (2017) sees this monetisation of education as a larger process of industrial production where higher education provides the solutions for the many supranational or global policy-forming organisations, such as the OECD and EU. Governments and organisations use rankings and statistics to decide the functions of education systems. The ability to meet standards is a form of performance criteria which show each system's capability, and Irish participation in Bologna and Lisbon cements its status as a participatory nation. Historically, Ireland has had a long-standing relationship between education and economic progress in Ireland, but the shift in perspective enhances this and prioritises economic advantages above other social benefits.

1.6 Concluding Remarks

Throughout the period from the 1960s to the early 2000s, Ireland accepted and implemented many significant changes to its education sector. While the memberships of the OECD and EU are noted, it is Ireland's participation which has changed the way the higher education sector operates. The *Investing in Education* report and participation in the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy are important examples. This is not only because they can be seen as milestones, but also, Irish policy shall continue to be impacted by OECD reports and the responsibilities to

maintain the standards set out through the Bologna Process and Lisbon Treaty. While the GFC steadily began to impact Ireland's economy, it is worth recalling Lyons (1973), who recognised Ireland's need to respond to past domestic problems through internationally sourced solutions.

Chapter 2

Internationalisation in Higher Education as Global Phenomenon

Around the world, higher education has continuously grown and expanded. For both its function and fashionableness, higher education has been proven as a way for governments to engage in nation building, while also providing opportunity and potential within society. Ireland's experiences in the twentieth century are a relevant example of this. The rise of internationally sourced higher education was globally prominent during the twentieth century, and Ireland can prove to be a worthwhile example of a country attempting to benefit from internationally focused education. However, internationalisation in higher education is a phenomenon encapsulating practically every continent in the world in some way, and Ireland is merely a participant. This chapter shall attempt to define and explain internationalisation, present examples of internationalisation in English speaking countries, and begin to connect Irish higher education to this worldwide process.

Internationalisation has been driven largely by the movement of students seeking to study overseas. The students who do this are widely described as international students, and this is used as an official term or a generalised way for calling or labelling students who are not normally resident in the host country. This movement of students through Internationalisation incorporates a range of processes which can be categorised as student mobility, and this can include student exchanges, study year or semester abroad, or as is considered most lucrative, completing an undergraduate or postgraduate degree or qualification (UNESCO Bangkok, 2013). Other aspects of internationalisation fall between research and industry collaboration, internationalisation at home and of the curriculum, and transnational education exemplified by dual degree programmes which operate between partner universities. The British Council reports that these features can be trends with levels of attention that alter depending on global circumstances, and governments have become more aware of the need for policy to

enable greater interaction with internationalisation processes (Ilieva and Peak, 2016). Importantly, all aspects of internationalisation rely on awareness and engagement with individuals or organisations located. Internationalisation can be seen as a process and reaction which is dependent on networks developed between individuals, national or supranational organisations, and authorities.

2.1 Questioning the definition of internationalisation

The rationales, providers, stakeholders, and activities involved in internationalisation change frequently. In higher education, internationalisation is an area with many interacting elements which operate distinctly from other areas of education. To understand internationalisation and the way different stakeholders' function, a definition is necessary. This can ensure that the meaning reflects the present realities and it can guide and remain relevant to new developments. As internationalisation is a global factor, it should be included here to give greater context for this contemporary global phenomenon.

There are numerous ways of defining internationalisation. Knight's (2004) initial definition of internationalisation in education as the "process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p.2) overlooks many of the contemporary issues internationalisation faces in higher education systems worldwide. DeWit and Hunter (2015) have attempted to extend this definition to specify that internationalisation should 'enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society' (p.33). Yet, this definition insufficiently acknowledges the ways in which this stipulation can be manipulated, and such a definition may not be representative of all who participate in internationalisation. Despite these established viewpoints, Marginson (2022) argues that an actual definition for internationalisation is restrictive as it can fail to acknowledge the diversity which internationalisation is now influenced by. If there is to be a single definition, there are concerns that this may be restrictive of individual identities in global higher education, and it is necessary to question would be deemed appropriate to formalise a definition.

Internationalisation needs to be understood both at the national or sector level and at the institutional level. It requires a definition but only one which encompasses flexibility and acknowledges the different scopes of internationalisation. This definition should allow for the distinguishable relationships and integrity necessary for stakeholders to thrive. The varying levels of internationalisation involve different stakeholders with interests across a range of areas, and the diversity of influences requires acceptable and relevant guidance. A definition must support stakeholders but limit opportunities to benefit, buttress, or support actions which prioritise exploitative practices over educational progress. This definition should aim for a level of criticality which can effectively shape government enacted policy on internationalisation.

Internationalisation in higher education is a process and reaction which functions in a variety of ways, and through its continuous action it has further growth and development as its objective. In this process, individual goals or milestones may be set or met, but it moves towards a constantly growing apex. In the case of Ireland, internationalisation relates to a wider policy based approach with many significant elements involved. By classifying Irish activities as internationalisation, this accepts that attracting students is one component of many which facilitates a wider influence across Irish higher education.

2.1.2 Internationalisation as a process

Describing internationalisation as a process is an important distinction. It indicates that internationalisation does not act independently, and it relies on many actions and reactions for it to function. In this sense, the process of internationalisation in higher education is one encouraged or forced by people or organisations, and it is not something which merely occurs. Processes, in general, require a beginning and an ending. Within this, processes have individual steps which lead to a goal or their completion, and different factors may lead to different results. Each step in a process involves various actions or factors which allow it to function, and internationalisation in higher education is not any different. Importantly, a process is active and ongoing, and invariably is initiated by a stakeholder.

Internationalisation is been practised on a global scale. Due to this, it is possible to distinguish between the ways' internationalisation is conceived, and to highlight the issues which need to be addressed. The many functions of internationalisation are not universally applied. Seeber, Meoli and Cattaneo (2018) explain that practices in higher education institutes across Europe differ in aspects such as size, availability of resources, and the objectives of different universities. These activities have been influenced by government policy and the motivations of institutes which seek to achieve particular internationalisation goals. These goals can be compared with the United States higher education sector, but even though Slaughter and Cantwell (2011) see distinctly different approaches it is noted that both jurisdictions seek to fulfil market dominance through neoliberal management. The EU in particular has utilised significant resources to establish strict quality frameworks as a benchmark for maintaining high standards in the higher education sector.

Even if the procedural nature of internationalisation is widely accepted, this does not mean it is sustainable. As internationalisation has grown, maintaining or implementing quality has been a priority but determining indicators and their appropriacy has encountered such concerns (van Damme, 2001; Gao, 2018). Also, the many interactions and connections between students, faculties and institutions are the reasons which make it desirable in higher education, rather than perceived economic benefits (Ilieva, Beck and Waterstone, 2014). Importantly, in the field of research on internationalisation, George Mwangi et al. (2018) found that while there was a lack of criticality in research, the sheer size and differences between different internationalisation settings have made effective analysis very difficult to complete. In these examples, we note some of the complexities with which internationalisation functions as a process. However, as internationalisation is also reactionary, this must be addressed.

2.1.2 Internationalisation as a reaction

Internationalisation is a reaction by stakeholders involved in higher education to the pressures of globalisation. What this means is that globalisation occurs in various forms and one of the responses experienced in higher education is internationalisation. Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) describe the

difference as globalisation being the 'exogenous force pressing down on higher education, while internationalisation is the particular manifestation of cross-border interactions undertaken by institutions in reaction to being pushed' (p.290). Interactions are carried out by a wide range of stakeholders which include higher education institutes, research bodies, and government education departments, ministries, secretariats, and the large for-profit and private educational companies and services sector who respond to the opportunities or threats presented by globalisation. Altbach and Knight (2007) point to these stakeholders as driving the 'two-way street' of ideas and individuals which have long been the mainstay of internationalised education. In this situation, each higher education institute takes a personalised approach to internationalisation which represents the distinct characteristics and strengths of objectives or desired outcomes (Knight, 2017). Internationalisation, unlike globalisation, involves the choices made by its participants as reactions to the forces of globalisation, so universities could be seen as acting intuitively to globalising factors. However, Khoo (2011) sees universities being made to act as almost a go-between with obligations to fulfil the multiple educational and research roles, and as a means of responding to national policy put forward by government. With higher education subsistent on government through funding, as has historically been the case in Ireland, universities may struggle to define objectives beyond this.

The extent to which different higher education institutes can apply internationalisation strategy to both benefit the institution and meet the goals set by government could leave some stakeholders short. It is an assumption that by developing programmes and allowing international students to study in universities, both students, institutions, and nations can universally benefit (Skinkle and Embleton, 2014, De Wit, 2015). Due to this, it is necessary to analyse the reactions of students from overseas and their host universities or nations to changes in policy and global events or trends. There must be no assumptions that the same pressures which impact individual students are the same as those impressing on institutions. Tight (2021) highlights that many who are aware of the relationships between internationalisation and globalisation which have enhanced the spread of internationalisation accept the processes in place. Despite an increased global

focus, research in internationalisation has remained Anglocentric and has sought to maintain dependency on systems which may not benefit local systems in emerging countries (Bedenlier, Kondakci and Zawacki-Richter, 2018). This has damaged the reputation of internationalisation.

Neoliberalism is one way of determining the influence which globalisation holds on internationalisation, but this fails to acknowledge that globalisation can be recognisable in many ways and functions (Beck, 2012). DeSousa Santos calls neoliberalism the 'political form of globalization resulting from US type of capitalism' (Dale and Robertson, 2010, p. 151), Bamberger, Morris and Yemini (2019) reinforce this point by establishing that while neoliberalism is frequently used to explain many negative aspects relating to internationalisation, the multiplicity of neoliberal functions in higher education are not clearly defined. In settings far removed from the hegemonic nature of English speaking higher education it is plausible to suggest that neoliberalism is not the dominant ideology within education and government administrations, so decisions which may appear to be the result of neoliberalism, may not be. These points are important as we consider internationalisation's function in a globalised education sphere.

2.2 Internationalisation Globally

2.2.1 English speaking countries and Internationalisation

The growth of international education has seen a steady rise in importance, and research in internationalisation has helped to define the field. Initially, internationalisation was driven by English speaking countries, with research emerging specifically from the United States, Europe, Canada and Australia, indicating the locations it was most prominent, but this has been changing in the past ten years (Bedenlier, Kondakci and Zawacki-Richter, 2018). Between 1998 and 2018 OECD figures point to overall upward growth in the number of students choosing to study overseas, particularly with students from Asia (OECD, 2020). Participation in ERASMUS will have increased the figures of transnational activities in European states, however with greater than 57% of international students originating in Asia, the role of student mobility from Asian countries in internationalisation is substantial. According to 2020 figures, the OECD (2020)

recognised that of 5.6 million international students worldwide, more than 3.9 million students chose to study in OECD countries, while the remaining 1.7 million students chose to study outside the OECD.

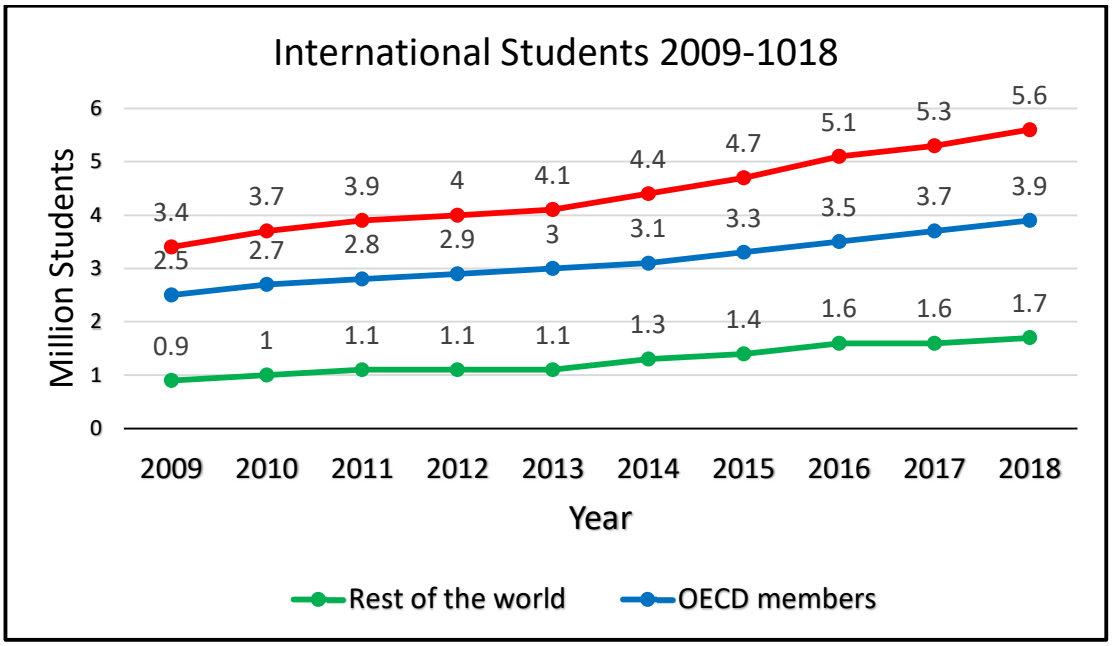

Table 1:Number of International students worldwide (OECD, 2020)

English is an important element of overseas study for many. The vast majority of OECD bound students, approximately 2.25 million students, chose English speaking destinations. Equally, the importance of international students to the higher education systems in English speaking countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada is substantial.

2.2.2 The popularity of study overseas

The twenty-first century has seen more enhanced systems designed for attracting and facilitating greater numbers of international students. The British Council (2019) highlights the prominence of European countries in this area, and the implementation of quality assurance and openness to internationalisation is described to be at a very high level, while non-European countries which do not largely speak English lag. In addition, it can be ascertained that English speaking systems have more advanced procedures for attracting international students because recruiting students is a key function for financially supporting higher

education institutes. The sheer number of international students is an indicator of this.

The figures provide sufficient evidence to argue that internationalisation is concentrated on western higher education systems which primarily teach through the English language. In fact, few would argue an alternative. While there are suggestions that the share of students studying overseas is shifting, Graddol's (2004) suggestion that English may decline in popular use has yet to occur.

China is still an important source of international students. According to He (2017), there were greater than 190 million people learning English in China, while amongst professionals a significant number viewed English as having increased professional and national importance. For many, study overseas is seen as a way to improve one's English or to offer better employment opportunities in the future, although this is not an exclusive reason (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Bodycott, 2009; Liu, Kamnuansilpa and Hirofumi, 2018). In the past number of years, different nations have learned to be responsive to demands in countries which send large numbers of students overseas, and this has made the sector highly competitive. Despite these increases, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia continue to set expectations through their dominance in the market.

2.2.3 United Kingdom and Australia as examples

The higher education systems in Australia and the United Kingdom are examples which have adapted to accommodate large numbers of international students. While the university sector may be dependent on income, it has also allowed for significant research to be carried out which can be applied to the Irish setting. Globally, both countries attract the second and third highest numbers of international students and this is regarded by Sá and Sabzalieva (2018) as a result of seeking positional advantage. Both Australia and UK prioritise positional advantage as they see it as a strategic advantage for their higher education systems to be regarded favourably. The most recent data shows international students make up 22% of the student body in the UK, of which 16% are from outside the EU, and this totals at 452,225 students (Higer Education Statistics Agency, 2022). According to data available, in 2021 Australia's overseas student population was approximately

30% of students enrolled, which amounted 489,234 students (Department of Education, 2021).

There is no comparison with Ireland in the scale of the projects both countries engage. The overall number students in higher education in Ireland is 245,663, and the international student population takes just over 10% of places. Despite this, the Irish government chooses to look to both the UK and Australia for guidance on policy making. While there is no direct reference about why this is the case, positional advantage and shared language can be considered as strong reasoning behind this.

2.2.4 Approaches to internationalisation in the United Kingdom

The similarities in higher education between the United Kingdom and Ireland are mostly geographical and language related. The United Kingdom has been a world leader for many years in the realm of internationalisation, not only as it welcomes large numbers of students from overseas, but also because it controls access to universities worldwide. This is predominantly managed through the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examination system, which is administered by the British Council and Cambridge English Assessment. Criticism of IELTS is widespread, but Sinclair, Larson and Rajendram (2019) note areas which need addressing include structural disadvantages for students who take the test, and a need for contextualised means of assessment which take account of diverse background of takers. Hyatt (2013) points to criticism of the testing which caused conflict between the need to maintain a high language standard and to meet recruitment targets. It is also noted that even students who met standards still required support. However, what is more significant is IELTS acts as a global gatekeeper to higher education for English programmes. Even with the flaws mentioned, the UK through IELTS maintains control over the academic future of thousands of students who wish to study overseas.

Many UK universities have refined and established global recruitment networks, and do not require the direct support of international strategies. That said, UK policy adheres to a different approach. Lijphart's (2012) describes the UK’s political organisation structure as majoritarian. This means that the ruling political party

with a majority in the House of Commons takes charge of decisions, and this is especially the case for social and economic activities or initiatives. Government determines the direction which policy must take, and others must adhere to it. An aspect of the UK's recent policy on internationalisation that stands out is the appointment of a 'champion', who is an individual responsible for overseeing and promoting the processes of higher education overseas. Contrastingly, Irish higher education has attempted to appear consensual in its approach to administration of internationalisation. This has been done in other areas of the state and is regarded as a way of solving problems (Bulsara and Kissane, 2009). Consensual approaches are not applied in areas which have more stability and leadership applies a majoritarian approach. This is suitable in Ireland's situation due to its lack of experience or background knowledge to internationalisation, although it may indicate different approaches in the future. The stakeholders are willing to work together to achieve a satisfactory result. This may look to be suitable or alternative approach to internationalisation in Ireland, as solutions in the shape of active working groups cooperating to achieve results have been employed because the experience or confidence needed is absent. While problematic, an advantage of this is that some stakeholders can access positions of influence more directly.

The relationships with former colonies are an important source of students for the UK, but also the reputation of higher education is used for political purposes. Lomer (2017) points to extensive attempts by successive governments to use higher education as a tool of soft power and a way to influence diplomacy through understanding of national values. McDonald (2020) says the role of the British Council supports this, and it is unique as no other English speaking country has a recognisable global brand to facilitate learning in English. Due to government intervention, this is problematic and politicises the purpose of attracting international students and ignores the pedagogical implications. In addition, while UK policy seeks to source the strongest quality students, the political message demonises international students for attempting to manipulate the system to take advantage of UK immigration (Chatterjee and Barber, 2021). Again, this attitude and approach is criticised directly in relation to the UKs prior relationships with formerly colonised territories.

As discussed previously (see Chapter 1), Ireland has benefitted from the importance of using education to build national identity and develop a capable workforce. Higher education systems from largely English speaking nations are viewed favourably due to their reputations, and Ireland appears to be targeting this area. The Irish higher education sector should be mindful of Irish history and approach attracting students from a more critical position. The long history of British rule in Ireland and shared language are not sufficient reasons for adopting the same approaches to recruiting international students. Discussions which address this critically are largely absent from discourse on internationalisation in Ireland, and this could cause ideological confusion.

2.2.5 Australian internationalisation and strategy

Recent policy in Australia was launched following the widespread disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and because of this the policy is heavily focussed on recovery. The approach looks to attract a sustainable and more diverse student cohort, where reliance on single national groups appears to be seen as undesirable. To make this possible there is significant investment promised, although this is unsurprising with such a large population of overseas students and a sector which relies heavily on this income.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, issues were emerging in the model for global internationalisation (Altbach and de Wit, 2018), and new directions and understandings have been sought. Rizvi (2020) explains that Australian higher education is highly dependent on international student revenue and the sector is regarded as distinct for its commercialised stature. Also, criticism increased when it became obvious that with less students from overseas, the loss of revenue for universities and the economy was considered more significant than the cultural and educative losses. This is representative of the structure of internationalised higher education in Australia, as detailed by Johnstone and Proctor (2018). In Australia, institutions are largely encouraged to pursue international education initiatives such as partnerships, mobility, or research, while government structures in place allow for efficient implementation where necessary. This includes attracting fee-paying students from overseas, which is also encouraged and backed by government

and is by far the largest and most productive element of internationalisation in Australia. Institutions frequently prioritise recruitment of students over other internationalising procedures which causes conflict because institutional and state internationalisation strategies may have to alter. At the same time, Proctor and Arkoudis (2017) raise concern that understandings of internationalisation need to be refined towards a more sustainable and focused approach which addresses all elements of internationalisation. This will be increasingly emphasised in the future, and especially following the hardships of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As Australia has established a strong foothold in the hierarchy of internationalisation, its policy focused approach to supporting higher education to implement internationalisation offers a useful example. The current Australian strategy sees internationalisation's role encompassing institutional development rather than just a means of sourcing extra income.

2.3 Concluding remarks

Defining internationalisation is an important element to help to understand the extent to which it operates within the strata of global higher education. There are well-established definitions, but it must be recognised that such definitions can be multifarious and flexible according to suit shifting trends, conditions, and settings. For example, a definition should be mindful of the geographical and political locations where it can be applied, and accepting approaches based on preferable criteria creates problems. Unsuitable examples, such as Ireland adapting approaches similar to the UK and Australia, should raise concerns about hierarchisation and elitism in globalised higher education.

Chapter 3

Internationalisation of Higher Education in Ireland

The Irish government reacted slowly to the increasing popularity of internationalised higher education. From 2008, greater consideration was paid towards this global phenomenon, with numerous significant global events reshaping the setting in which Irish higher education operated. Through participation in the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, Ireland accepted the direction which higher education in Europe wished to take, but it also showed that it was an active participant seeking to reform its system. Calls to increase the number of international students and for more interactions with universities around the world became important aspects of the new direction. Specific international education strategies which focused on attracting students from overseas were required to fulfil the needs of the government's aspirations but also to make Ireland competitive in the performance-driven higher education landscape. This chapter will explore and crucially analyse the strategies which attempted to internationalise higher education in Ireland.

3.1 Irish higher education and the global financial crisis

In Ireland, university was traditionally considered a space for career preparation and developing broader societal understanding. The onset of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) caused global and domestic economic turmoil and instigated major changes in Irish higher education from 2008. The GFC gave opportunities to the government to push through neoliberal reforms, while forthcoming knowledge economy policy would be described as a means of reviving the lagging economy. However, there was a shift towards prioritising and accommodating individuals' choices and fulfilling the demands of the market (Lynch, 2017). The popularity of university ranking systems and widescale marketing of higher education are indicators of how the perception of higher education changed. Universities were no longer viewed as solely education- or research-focused organisations which serviced a

domestic or local economy. They are also considered as competitive and globalised entities responsible for providing services and generating their own income.

3.1.1. Higher education as a tradable commodity

Irish higher education was viewed as a tradable commodity and a means of increasing Ireland's economic competitiveness. The rollout of a targeted strategy to address developing Ireland's knowledge economy capabilities in 2008 exemplifies this direction. *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008) sets this out clearly by labelling it as a tradable service. This could be implemented through regulation or overseeing of Irish educational contributions to the global market. Importantly, this policy's main purpose was designed to highlight Ireland's willingness to fulfil responsibilities and commitments within the Lisbon Strategy and Bologna Process, and it was not a preventative response to the GFC. The strategy also responded to the neoliberal expectations within the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy, both of which expected education to function centrally in an established knowledge economy.

Building Ireland's Smart Economy was an important government plan as it prioritised the development of Ireland as a knowledge economy. This recognised Ireland's higher education structures as central features for profit making in the Irish economy. *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* also aimed to place Irish higher education strategically. This position would attract:

> "new possibilities through new alliances and new organisational arrangements that can advance our knowledge capacity and generate opportunity for new levels of efficiency, performance, innovation and growth" (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008, p. 75).

Building alliances, increasing diversity and restructuring systems to meet the requirements of partnerships between global stakeholders are recognisable goals for institutions. However, success is measurable in greater efficiency, performance and innovation, and these targets are communicated through increased research revenues, more partnerships, positions on global rankings and more students from overseas. Despite the wording of this document, growth can only be deemed acceptable if its achievements are measurable.

Policy frequently works as a response to previous policy failures. Where initially it appears *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* is a reaction to economic downturn by attempting to attract more fee-paying students, this may not be the case. The step-by-step approach where policy reacts to changes or crises is described by Brenner *et al*. (2010) as

cumulative, whereby regulatory actions are employed not as the result of a well-thought-through process, but as the result of 'regulatory experimentation and institutional tinkering' (p. 190). In this example, a policy has been designed to resolve a situation which a previous approach ignored or failed to address.

3.1.1.1 The Impact of 'The Bailout' on Higher Education

The ongoing financial problems resulted in the most explicit outcome of the GFC in Ireland, which is referred to colloquially as 'the bailout'. This was an €85 billion structured loan to rescue the stricken economy, but the 'bailout' was contingent on many financial and administrative reforms. The slowdown in the world economy, a result of neoliberal policies on a global scale, had a direct impact on Irish higher education, due to unprecedented cuts to funding (Mercille and Murphy, 2017). The GFC was a watershed moment for Irish higher education, which resulted in substantial changes to how education was administered. Resulting management and financing reforms within funding organisations, such as universities and research bodies, saw budgets cut by millions of Euros (Hazelkorn and Massaro, 2010). Failures in previous policy prior to the GFC allowed neoliberal reforms to be gradually pushed through, and this would increase during the crisis.

The education sector experienced much attention from austerity measures as education already received a large proportion of the national budget. Irish HEIs were placed in a precarious situation as they relied excessively on direct government funding. Initial cuts to funding in higher education were deemed 'ludicrous' (Flynn, 2008). Reductions of both salaries and pensions, decreased capital spending and funding, and increased student contributions resulted in private sources being seen as ways for generating income and making up shortfalls (Lillis and Morgan, 2012). Holborow and O'Sullivan (2017) established that the shortfall in state funding to higher education was laid upon students with increased registration fees, but also large teacher-student ratios. In higher education, reductions could have appeared excessive and potentially harmful, especially as students and teachers' unions saw education as a means of responding positively to austerity and recession (Flynn, 2010).

3.1.1.2 Approaching International Education Strategy

Ireland's response to the GFC attempted to rectify this and prioritised the mechanisms for greater economic opportunities for HEIs, including attracting international students. For higher education, attracting more international students was a way of enhancing the educational experience, but this was also considered a way to allow Irish HEIs to source income from new sources. Irish internationalisation strategy appears to have been created

to help universities to cope with significant economic difficulty, as well as a performance-driven market present within global higher education.

According to Finn and O'Connell (2012), the contribution to higher education by overseas students at that time was €192 million, and this had been increasing. For government, linking the necessity for more income for HEIs and greater numbers of international students was a straightforward connection. The benefits of increasing the number of fee-paying international students were deemed sufficient for a more focused and centralised approach to attract more students, and this is evidenced by the actions of government. In 2009, Minister for Education Batt O'Keeffe announced that the process of establishing a 'Q mark' for education would formally regulate the education sector's processes for attracting and catering for fee-paying international students from overseas (Department of Education, 2009). In the same announcement, it was also put forward that the *Education in Ireland* brand would be reorganised, and a high-level group on international education would be set up to inform the department of education on best practice. Finally, immigration law would be reformed with respect to students from outside the EU entering the country. These steps by Minister O'Keeffe aimed to create a system which allowed Ireland to encourage more students from overseas to come to Ireland.

Prioritising international student recruitment required careful attention and changes. A code of practice was published by the Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN) entitled *Provision of Education to International Students: Code of Practice and Guidelines for Irish Higher Education institutions* (2009). This was specifically for the management and recruitment of international students in both higher education and the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) sector. This code of practice was not binding and was largely a set of guidelines and a means of regulating immigration of international students from outside the European Union. However, it did initiate the structures which acknowledged that fee-paying students were valued for their contribution, even if the extent of this was yet to be stipulated. These steps initiated the process for Ireland's formal engagement with internationalised education.

3.1.2 The hunt report

Coinciding with 'the bailout' at the end of 2010 and at the beginning of 2011, Ireland launched two very significant policy documents. Both would shape Irish higher education and its international approach for the future. The first was Ireland's first strategy for international education, while the second, and ultimately most important, was *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), referred to widely as the Hunt Report after

Dr Colin Hunt, who chaired the panel responsible for devising the report. The Hunt Report, even though it followed the international education strategy, must be discussed first because of its wider and longer-term significance. This analysis will provide the necessary background and insight into the direction higher education in Ireland was due to take.

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 was the framework for which Irish higher education was to be developed. The report determined internationalisation and its processes, among other findings, were to be a priority within the vision which was formed for Irish education. The report was responding to an OECD review of Irish higher education which made a series of projections on the structures and functions of the Irish education system. This review recommended more focus on research, development and innovation linked to economic and regional policy (OECD, 2005). However, it also criticised Ireland for its lack of international students and stated that Ireland should be seeking to increase the number of non-EU international students. The financial benefit to higher education from fee-paying students was seen as an essential motivator. This report reaffirmed a long-standing mantra in Irish higher education that increasing human capital was essential for the Irish economy (Walsh and Loxley, 2014). The Hunt Report is important as it formalised a managerialist approach to higher education, with responsibility for achieving targets and reforms given to the HEA.

The report prioritised a new global conjecture for higher education. International students were to be considered an important part of Ireland's future 'international presence', along with internationally distinguished research, and Ireland would be of importance in the 'changing global landscape' (DES, 2011). This acknowledgement showed awareness for the increasing prominence of international education, globally, and requirement for an immediate response, especially considering Ireland's economic difficulties.

3.1.2.1 Responding to Global Trends

Internationalisation of Irish higher education was set out as a long-term priority for Irish higher education, with the objective of benefitting from the worldwide increase in people accessing education at all levels. As more students chose to study overseas, responses to the advantages of internationalising the higher education system were prioritised. These advantages were repeated clearly in the Hunt Report and in subsequent internationalisation strategies. They include attracting talent, research collaboration and diversified revenue streams for HEIs and are heavily influenced by another 2008 OECD publication, *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*. Globally, it was recognised that attracting international students had a generally positive impact on labour markets and on countries'

balance of payments (Santiago *et al.*, 2008), while also having positive impacts on the overall efficiency and quality of higher education in domestic economies. Notably, Santiago *et al.* (2008) showed that Ireland was the only OECD member without a formal or statutory policy or strategy for attracting or monitoring international students. Many of the insights and suggestions put forward in the OECD publication were widely accepted by Irish policymakers. Because of the severity the GFC economically inflicted on Ireland from 2008 and the ongoing need to review the function of higher education, it appears that policymakers borrowed heavily from the insights and suggestions put forward.

Ireland correctly met many of the criteria which internationalisation was suited to. As a participant in the EHEA, Ireland's education could be compared across a global standard, and its membership of the EU provided many social and economic advantages for potential participants. Additionally, proximity to the UK can also be seen to be advantageous, and even after Britain's exit from the European Union this relationship is still important. Ireland's reputation as little known and a 'green' country may have also carried some prestige factor, as it had the potential for smaller groups of conational students. However, Ireland's strongest advantage for attracting students from overseas is that Ireland uses English as a first language, a so-called 'critical factor' (Santiago *et al.*, 2008, p. 253) for deciding on a destination for study overseas. For this reason, Ireland would look to replicate policy from established systems in other English-speaking countries. Policy transfer has many components, and Ball (2021) explains it as a process which involves the influence of multiple stakeholders in various global and local spaces where ideas and ideologies are shared within complex networks. This is exemplified by the Irish authorities, which leaned heavily on reports from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, as they discussed attracting or improving the international education product (DES, 2010). At the time, 46% of international students around the world studied in English-speaking destinations (Santiago *et al.*, 2008), which was seen as a serious opportunity for the Irish education sector. The historical advantages for attracting North American foreign direct investment will have been understood clearly by Irish policymakers. This will have been seen as a good reason to implement the recommendations. However, it must also be noted that Ireland seems to have accepted all of the OECD's recommendations without critique.

The Hunt Report presented internationalisation as a key factor which would drive Ireland's future higher education. As part of the responsibilities adhered to in Ireland's approach to becoming a knowledge economy, formal structures ensuring participation can be seen to align with wider European and global norms. These changes are attempts to emulate rather

than to innovate, and they are evidence of neoliberal changes implemented through supranational ideas, which Dale (2005) sees as implicit with the knowledge economy. The Hunt Report laid important foundations for current and later international education strategies to develop. It may be said to have achieved its objective of internationalising the Irish higher education sector, especially as the administrative changes allow the sector to be monitored in greater detail. The ways that this can be applied in the internationalisation of Irish higher education can be seen in the implementation of strategies designed to attract more students and research from around the world.

3.2 Internationalisation policy for higher education in Ireland.

Investing in Global Relationships (IGR) and *Irish Educated, Globally Connected* (IEGC) are important because they have provided the impetus and support necessary for wide-scale internationalisation in Irish higher education to take place. Implementation of international education strategies by the Irish government were designed specifically to enhance Irish higher education and the ways it was perceived. Ireland's formal adoption of internationalisation strategy in 2010 and renewal and consolidation in 2016 have seen a priority shift across higher education towards engaging in internationalisation. As a result of both policies, Irish HEIs have become more engaged and responsive to key facets of the international student market (Groake and Durst, 2019; Clarke, Yang & Harmon, 2018). As such, internationalisation in higher education has become an integral element in Ireland's educational and economic landscape.

3.2.1 Economic significance to *Investing in Global Relationships*

The launch of IGR can be viewed in the context of the Irish economic situation and the challenges facing higher education as a result of the GFC. It was made clear by government that attracting international students was viewed as an economically viable and attractive activity which would not only benefit universities, but also would have wider knock-on benefits.

This policy cannot be distanced from the political and economic situation as higher education had already suffered significant financial cutbacks. The launch of IGR in September of 2010 preceded the EU, ECB, and IMF financial support package, the 'bailout', by a mere two months. As the higher education sector relied heavily on financial support from government, internationalisation appears as an attempted stimulus plan. The timely

initiation of policy in this area could be seen as a remedy to weaken the impact of impending cuts.

Economic concerns in government gained credence, so the requirement of policy designed specifically for attracting international students became clearer. Financial survival from reductions in funding resulted in universities and policymakers focusing on attracting more international students. For institutions capable of attracting greater numbers, this approach could be financially lucrative. Increased internationalisation in higher education, largely represented by fee-paying students from outside the EU, was a necessary counterbalance in the context of unprecedented economic difficulty which resulted from the impact of the GFC. Haigh (2014) is critical of this understanding, even if the Irish economic context is applied, as internationalisation contains multiple layers with varying priorities. There is a 'selective deafness' to alternative views and criticism that can have long-term implications for areas of internationalisation. In this instance, areas which have functions distanced from generating a profit by recruiting more students are ignored. In Ireland, policy initially attempted to provide universities a supportive measure or helping hand to raise funds from external sources. However, these funds would be raised based on terms prescribed by the policymakers.

There are economic and educational advantages which make internationalisation in higher education a popular policy choice. However, universities are obliged to respect expressions of universal values in education and support for the individual in his or her quest to learn and become knowledgeable, regardless of borders and the many other obstacles placed before us. The Department of Education and Skills (N/D) reflects these values in its expressed goals by aiming to 'shape a responsive education and training system that meets the needs and raises the aspirations of all'. Despite these assurances, the purposes and objectives of higher education are defined not by declarations or mission statements, but by the way they conduct themselves in the public sphere.

Universities can appear to be acting in good faith. According to UNESCO principles within the *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (1960, Article 4), there is a commitment for higher education to be accessible to all, based on their capacity to learn. In addition, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), of which Ireland is a signatory, sees education as a right which 'shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms' (UNHCR, 1966, p. 5). The treaty directs signatory states to make higher education 'equally accessible to all', with no

limitations or restrictions, and that this education should be ‘free’ (UNHCR, 1966 p. 5). How ‘free’ is interpreted is contestable; free does not expressly relate to cost and may relate to freedom to choose. In higher education, freedom of access has long been controlled through recognition of learning or ability by way of exams or international awards, such as IELTS or TOEFL language tests. The need to pay fees can be deemed as one more criterion set by providers and governments.

Through policy, the government controls the shape it wishes internationalisation to take. The presence of stakeholders and other facets of government provide an understanding of this. IGR allowed for the formation of a High-Level Group on International Education, which included participants from a range of stakeholders. This group had 24 members divided between government departments and offices, and representatives from higher education, English language education and some student representations (DoE, 2010). Seeber, Meoli and Cattaneo (2018) assert that size, resource availability and objectives of strategies on internationalisation in Europe are determined by government and institution requirements, so allowing multiple participants should account for a wide range of positions. However, of the 24 members in the High-Level Group, the majority were from government sectors which had an interest in international education, including tourism, enterprise and immigration. In this case, the importance of stakeholders is determined by the policy’s creators, but it also shows that the efficacy of strategy is decided by the objectives of the government which designed it. Input from important educational and student bodies is present; however, their ability to influence decisions is limited, as they represent a minority.

3.2.2 Attempting internationalisation – Ireland’s steps towards a formal policy

Ireland’s formal foray into internationalisation was later than many other OECD states. Where other governments have ratified approaches to the management of internationalisation, Ireland had left respective institutions with the responsibility of managing student intake. There had been no steps by previous governments to officially implement any internationalisation processes. In 2010, Ireland’s first policy attempted to fulfil as many criteria established as a requisite for a working internationalisation strategy. Indeed, the policy document launched in 2010 makes no qualms about this and follows the guidelines as important suggestions for the policy’s construction. The attempt to create a strategy which was equivalent to global standards must be scrutinised.

When devising policy on internationalisation, the Irish government has recognised many elements which are, potentially, strengths, but it has accepted OECD suggestions uncritically. Ireland focuses on language as the stand-out feature which makes it an attractive destination for overseas study, with some ascribing to the belief that people desire to learn in globalised and progressive education systems, which happen to be conducted in English (DES, 2010; DES, 2016). Ireland looked to other English-speaking countries for models to build international education strategy around, as this criterion suggested the strategy had the potential to succeed (DES, 2010). This is contradictory as Ireland wished the country to be seen as a 'niche' in the international education sector. Ireland could be considered in this way as it is an English-speaking member of the EU, has a small size and population, and the scope of higher education sector is much smaller, which could be attractive to those seeking a unique experience. Later, policy would also look at the quality of education and career preparation as vital aspects, which were noted.

3.2.3 Targets and objectives of policy

In Ireland, internationalisation is a heavily commercialised practice which is backed up by clear marketing strategies and sales teams which actively engage with key education markets around the world. Both IGR and IEGC were established on the potential to successfully meet or excel in achieving given targets, either by exceeding the number of students who were attracted to Ireland or the increased economic value to the country. The definitions of what constitutes a success are not clear. This is corroborated by a review report which applauded greater numbers of students but questioned how other benchmarks could be considered (DFHE, 2020). Even though the key objective of attracting students has been achieved in both strategies, there is plenty of uncertainty regarding the extent of success. This is a fault of the strategies, as they fail to define the objectives so that their targets can be evaluated. It is also the case that some elements simply cannot be quantifiably measured.

3.2.3.1 Nominalist logic

The success of policies is based on measurable factors, and this theme is recognisable in Irish higher education policy since 2000. This system functions through the use of data and is beneficial to policy makers for its comparison of targets, competition, or the past. Comparisons are made more effective through participation in entities such as the European Higher Education Authority (EHEA), which has set a standard for higher education delivery and now provides a universal

way for various higher education systems to be compared. The OECD functions similarly but deals with a wider variety of knowledge and statistics. Robertson and Dale (2017) call participation in these settings nominalist logic, whereby each system of education has enough common characteristics and all can be analysed on the same criteria. Essential to participation in this system is accurate and comprehensive collection of statistical data on all aspects of the higher education sector, and especially in the cases of international students. Following analyses of data, results are used to explain consequences, rather than a way to understand causes.

3.2.3.2 Value of Increased numbers of international students

The most clearly stated objective within Irish policy has been to prioritise attracting more students from fee-paying regions. Through the period 2009-2018, the number of students arriving in Ireland largely showed a steady year-by-year increase (Table 1). These increased numbers were primarily driven by students from South America, the Middle East and Asia. To understand the growth, it can be reviewed over an extended period. In 2009/10, there were 153,728 full-time and part-time enrolments, or total enrolments (HEA, 2010), and 9,563 were not registered as being students from Ireland. The total enrolments grew to 223,743 by 2017/18, with 22,929 full-time students registered as not from Ireland. Revenue generated from non-EU students is significantly larger, with non-EU students providing 94% of tuition-fee income to Irish HEIs. Figures from IEGC show the direct contribution from non-EU fee-paying students in 2014/15 was €177 million, and €11 million by EU students as their tuition fees are supplemented (DES, 2016). By making this distinction, the report wishes to distinguish the two categories and highlight the economic value of non-EU students.

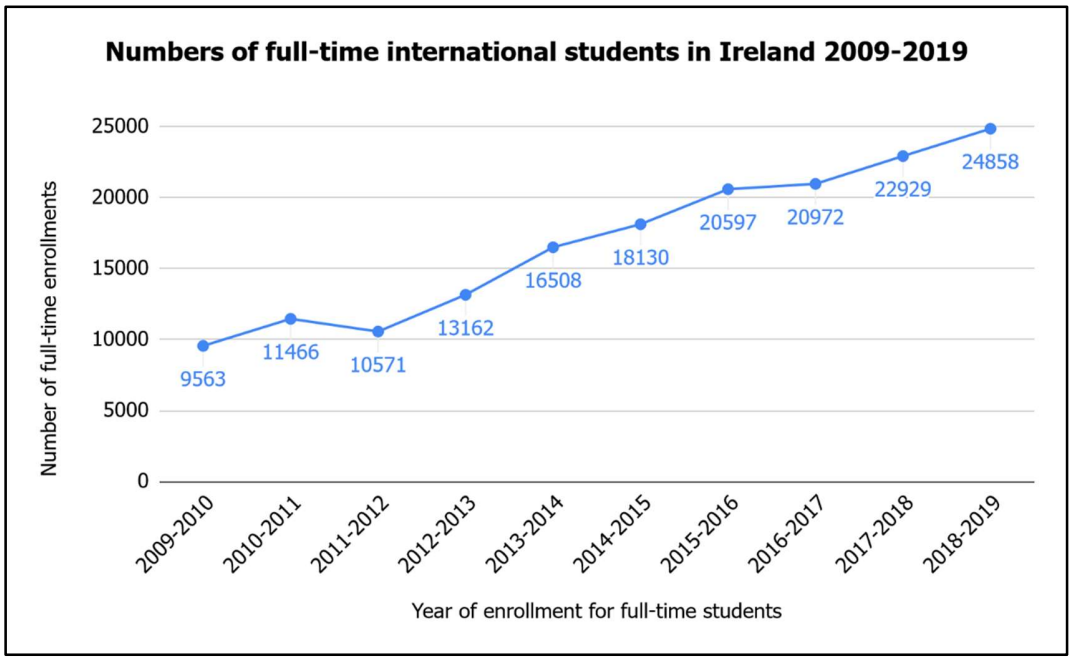

Table 2 Numbers of full-time international students in Ireland, 2009-2019

The economic contribution by non-EU and fee-paying students was given significant attention. IEGC takes the overall value of direct output from international students when evaluating the financial contribution. The indirect and induced output from international students in Ireland is valued at €790 million. Those from the English Language sector were valued at €791 million, and this sees the entire international education sector account for a combined contribution of €1.58 billion to the economy (DES, 2016; Clarke, Yang & Harmon, 2018). A review of the sector suggested the value to have grown to approximately €2.4 billion (DFHE, 2020). Both sets of figures rely on direct contribution from the payment of fees; indirect contributions, which include housing, food and meals, and other daily costs; and induced economic benefits. In review, the need for caution when analysing these figures has been expressed clearly, as figures largely come from indirect contributions and involve a variety of factors (Clarke, Yang & Harmon, 2018; DFHE, 2022). It is also pointed out that government assessments attempt to account for all output, but this does not reflect a setting where many will spend money on services outside of Ireland, which has no impact on the economy. Despite this, attracting international students is recognised by government to have a 'proven ability' to support HEIs capital needs (IEGC, p. 46). These figures are important for our understanding of the perceived success of internationalisation and its overall objectives. They also provide ample justification to government for a renewal of the strategy.

In addition to growth in the international student population, there has been a steady increase in domestic students. The population of students accelerated between 2009 and 2018, showing an overall rise in participation in higher education on a national level (Table 2). In 2009/10, the 9,563 international students in Ireland constituted approximately 6.2% of the total higher education population, while in 2019, the 24,858 international students accounted for 12.5%. Despite figures showing a 140% increase by 2017/2018, overall participation in higher education had increased by 20%, indicating an upsurge in interest in the demand for higher education, domestically.

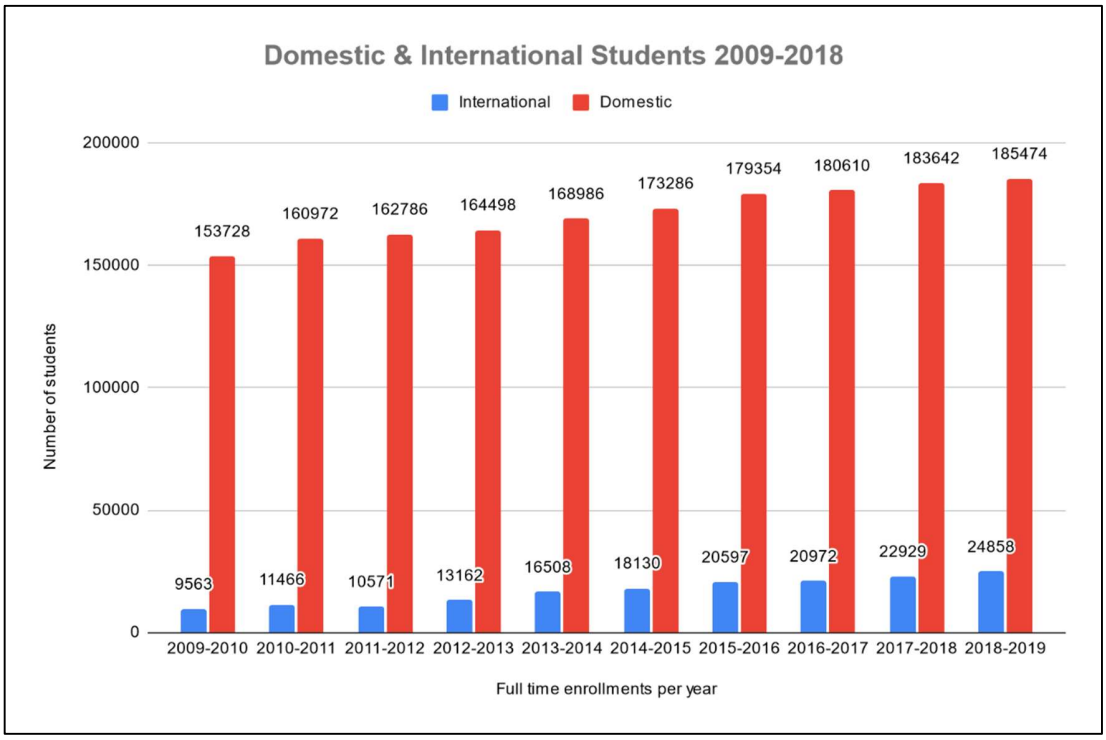

Table 3: Domestic and International Students 2009-2018

Increases in students from overseas can be attributed to the targets set by government strategy. These approaches operate as instructions for stakeholders, with suggested measures to help meet targets, and success is typified by more students choosing to study in Ireland. IGR proposed increasing the number of international students by 50% to approximately 12,000 students (DES, 2010), while IEGC targeted an increase of 33%, which would mean that international students accounted for 15% of students in Ireland. (DES, 2016). These targets were seen as attainable, and meeting each would be celebrated as reasons to continue with focused policy.

Targets for attracting students to Ireland avoided important details. The ways targets could be met or achieved was not included and so were details on the extent to which policy

impacted students' decisions to come to Ireland. A review of IEGC indicated an absence of measurable criteria among numerous targets, which made them difficult to assess (DFHE, 2020). In both IGR and IEGC, targets for attracting more students and increasing the economic value are attainable, which allows the policy to define how it can be deemed a success. In both policies, more students arriving and increased income construed Ireland's approach to internationalisation as successful.

3.2.3.3 Reactions to changes by Irish strategy

It is clear that there is an economic value to attracting more fee-paying students from overseas, but other information on the quality of these experiences is absent. More focus has been applied to the attraction of Ireland for research purposes; however, there is little information shared on the quality of the research or the experience of those completing higher degrees.

Ireland has begun a process which De Wit (2019) describes as 'the long road'. This description sees the Irish strategy as a form of a journey with numerous influences interacting, with the potential to effect change independently. De Wit (2013, citied in De Wit, 2019) recognises the top-down nature of internationalisation strategies as quite problematic for those impacted, such as faculty and students. Also, adherence to measuring success through quantitative means, such as student numbers or income, is problematic as it fails to analyse the process which those involved experience when studying overseas.

Increasingly, research coming from Ireland has called for a more robust understanding of international students and their relationship with Ireland. Worryingly, Ryan *et al*. (2019) have pointed towards a lack of engagement by faculty towards aspects of internationalisation, with blame placed on the negative connotations related to the monetisation of globalised higher education. O'Reilly, Hickey and Ryan (2013) focused on international students' adaption to Ireland, both as a place to live and study. Psychological and socio-cultural issues relating to homesickness and independence in educational settings are concerns, as determined by staff who worked closely with students. This is considered an issue in other countries, where varying types of loneliness have been analysed and understood to have regressive impacts on student well-being and learning (Sawir *et al*., 2008; Bek, 2017; Wawera and McCamley, 2020). However, Tran (2013, cited in Tran and Vu, 2017) argues that international students are marginalised in discussions, and cultural and language differences are largely at fault for difficulties they face. In Ireland, as widespread internationalisation is quite new, this may account for the disparity in

understandings and approaches to engaging with students throughout their learning experience. Despite this, the increase in interest for internationally sourced education has seen many other countries responding with increased vigour for attracting international students.

IEGC benefited from previous policy and was able to draw on comprehensive and specific data relating to international students in Ireland. The second strategy benefitted from an extensive consultative process which involved numerous contributions. Attention to the traditional expectations and imagery appears to have been downplayed, and Ireland is now framed as a dynamic world-leader with the ability to meet the needs of students from various cultural backgrounds. This can be seen in frequent references to international technology companies based in Ireland, EU membership and use of English as the language of communication in all day-to-day activities.

Ireland has attempted to use the knowledge earned by other English-speaking countries to enhance its approach through effective policy. However, this approach still must account for mistakes or errors which are unique to Ireland. There remains a need to engage proactively at all levels with the overseas student population in Ireland, and faculty or teachers who work with these students may lack effective means of contributing to best practice for teaching and learning. Finally, it remains unclear whether Ireland shall continue to await other countries' initiative before it establishes further internationalisation activities.

3.2.4 Situating Irish internationalisation policy

As a safety net, the Irish higher education system purports the quality of its educational systems based on the EHEA systems of levels in the higher education system. This was originally overseen by *Higher Education Training and Awards Council* (HETAC) and later amalgamated into *Quality and Qualifications Ireland* (QQI). With this system, levels can be compared transparently across other European systems. For those investing in higher education, expectations on course content and suitability can be seen, while providers can show that the courses provided are comparable to those in other countries or with stronger reputations. As a small country, Ireland would recognise this advantage for its universities as qualifications can be compared with other European universities, and especially those in the English-speaking United Kingdom.

3.2.4.1 Policy mess

The strategies by the Irish state looked to amalgamate internationalisation within the wider ongoing reforms within higher education. The internationalisation strategies sought to achieve a lot, with many so-called strategic actions targeting the potential approaches to enhancing Ireland's education. With such an increase in activity in internationalisation, these changes could be perceived as wide-ranging and uncoordinated. It is also unclear how the many changes would be applied to the Irish systems already in place.

International education's policy space was largely new territory for those making important higher education related decisions. However, little critical consultation was presented prior to the enactment of initial policy on the internationalisation of education in Ireland. Trying to comprehend the complexities of the knowledge economy, higher education, and internationalisation policies and strategies which accompanied the early stages of the twentieth century shows what Levin (2006, cited in Woldegiorgis, 2018) calls an 'epidemic' of policies. According to Verger and Altinyelken (2020), the nature of global education policy construction is representative of the space where interconnected influences and functions of multi-level stakeholders interact. Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) indicate that even when previous neoliberal policy fails, the subsequent reaction results in more neoliberal policy, so that in time different policies can be viewed as stages in development. This can explain how policy functions in a clustered field of organisations, objectives, ideologies. It is also evidence of the industrialisation of higher education and policy, where policies and their targets universalise the solutions which higher education can provide (Filippakou, 2017). Within the Irish context, there has been an attempt to create policy which acts as a tool to enhance, control, and protect the Irish higher education sector, and using internationalisation in higher education appears to be an important mechanism.

3.4 Using English to drive Internationalisation Product/Project/Place –

Internationalisation is a target orientated project which can be successful if certain objectives are met. Ultimately, selected actions enacted within policy terms aim to

sustainably attract more fee-paying students. It is considered essential for success to build a system within Irish higher education which makes it attractive to students by competently offering a satisfactory learning experience.

3.4.1 Linguistic imperialism and internationalisation policy

The English language operates in higher education in a unique and powerful way, which has global ramifications that extend well beyond the reach of Irish policy making. This has been an established position for many years (Altbach, 1989; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Clarke et al., 2020), and the likelihood of it abating is limited. While the approach in policy is to attract international students, the emphasis placed on prioritising English as the language of instruction and day-to-day communication in Ireland alters how policy can be interpreted. This directs us to recognise the objectives of internationalisation strategies through a different lens.

The economic success of higher education systems which use English as a first language is considerable. For these reasons, Irish policy has looked to these examples to justify the initiation of strategies. In addition to the United Kingdom and Australia, Canada has shown that attracting more international students is lucrative. Prior to the roll out of policy in Ireland, both Australia and Canada were recognised as suitable examples to explain this. In Australia, the individual contribution by students was calculated to include contributions from day-to-day expenses, visits by family and friends, as well as the employment benefits to the economy. This was assessed to total almost $30,000 AUD towards the economy (Access Economics, 2009). Canadian government sources estimate $7.1 billion CAD is spent and over 80,000 jobs created through international students (Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2012). Policy authors in both Australia and Canada also operated closely along the guidelines of establishing internationalisation strategies set out by the OECD.

3.4.1.1 International students and linguistic imperialism

International students are a minority group within Irish higher education, and many who study in Ireland through a second language face greater challenges. Higher education through English and especially in English speaking countries operates in a unique space. This space is dominant in importance and popularity across higher education globally, and internationalisation of higher education facilitates this (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Clarke et al., 2020). The promoting and propagating of English in this context is referred to as linguistic globalisation or linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2008), and while there are many elements to this, the worldwide popularity of higher education is a component of note. The establishment of Ireland's internationalisation strategy can be recognised as a globalising effort by English-speaking Irish education. The Irish internationalisation process utilises policy to support the expansion and reach of Irish higher education beyond its traditional areas of attention. This policy operates within what Phillipson (2008) describes as the 'normative goal' (p.4) of English being dominant as a language of communication globally. Irish policy wishes to avoid reshaping the overall direction or demand of the global English language hierarchy. Instead, policy works to position Ireland where it can capitalise economically and positionally. For Irish higher education, the English language is the key element for the success of its internationalisation strategy.

Ireland wishes to take advantage of the linguistic imperialism in the structures of global higher education. Applying linguistic imperialism to the realm of higher education internationalisation is relevant because of the dominance exerted by English-speaking countries, notably the United States but also the United Kingdom and Australia, in attracting students from overseas. Huddart (2014) historically connects the English language as a tool of imperialism and colonialism, both British and American, and because English's spread has been 'like imperialism'. This suggests that linguistic imperialism is also cultural. For these reasons, the connection between English and internationalisation must be seen as significant

3.4.1.2 English speaking countries benevolent dominance

There is a widely held and long-established understanding that sees English speaking countries benefiting greatly from internationalisation (Altbach, 1989; Tikly, 2004; Altbach and Knight, 2007). Kachru's (1996) influential Three Concentric Circles of English (Figure 3) can help to explain this.

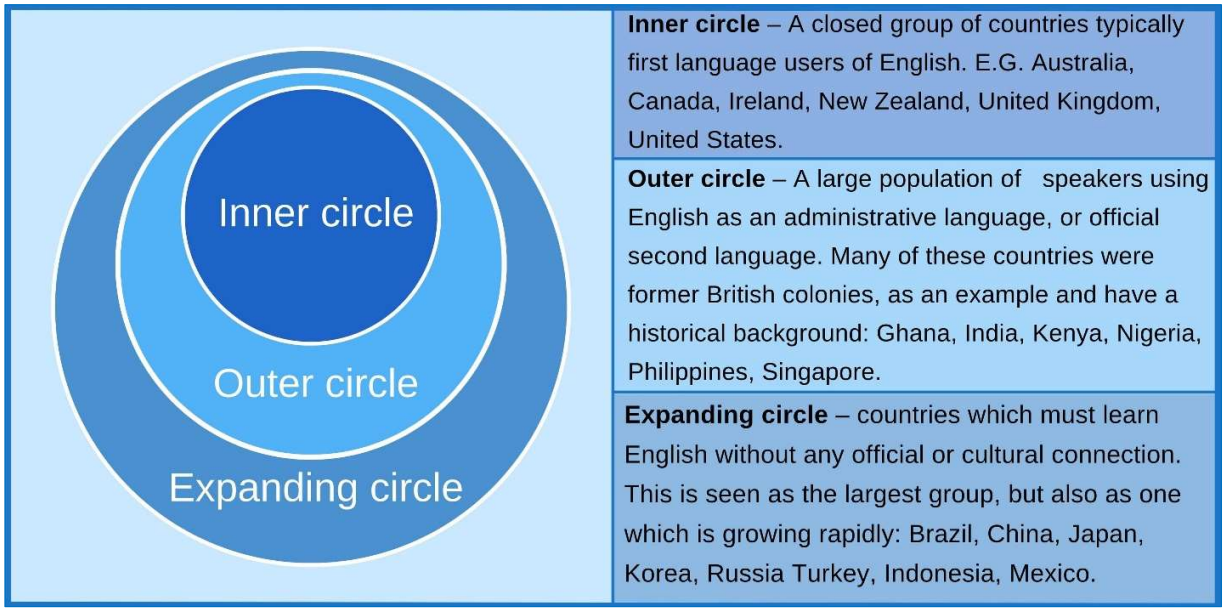

Image 1: Three Concentric Circles of English (Kachru, 1996)

In Kachru's model we see that different nations are categorised by the ways that English is used, where inner circle countries predominantly use English in all aspects of life and there is mostly not another language which dictates policy or society. In Kachru's original publication Ireland was not included in the list of inner circle nations, despite meeting all the criteria it was probably just seen as too small to be influential. Ireland will have seen itself as a norm-defining inner circle member because English was the spoken language. In outer circle countries, English is an administrative language, but it may be used in some social or other institutional settings. The expanding circle consists of countries which use English as a means of communicating with the world beyond its borders.

Kachru's model could struggle to contend with the plurality of ways that people acquire English today. Not only are individuals raised in multilingual households, the

necessity for English across so many spheres reduces the borders his theory relied on, and an excellent example is the European Union where English has been a de facto common or shared language. Kirkpatrick (2014) notes accepting English from different backgrounds or regions is not seamless, and frequently requires exposure before being accepted widely. That said, Kachru is correct that borders define the types of English people feel they learn, and for inner circle nations, being in a position to impact how English can be learned is valuable. As Ireland is not a well-known country in some regions, this may have been a concern for policy makers.

The presence of or discussion of Kachru's concept is to raise awareness which reflects a wider understanding of how English communication was viewed as a type of status. Not only was it a wildly held view that English speaking countries benefitted more from internationalisation because of the global status of the language; those from so-called inner circle countries viewed their apparent natural ability to communicate in English as a benevolent and elite status.

3.4.1.3 Linguistic imperialism applied to higher education

Linguistic imperialism applied to Irish internationalisation strategies addresses the top-down nature of policy which attempts to define the setting in which the strategy operates. The application of internationalisation strategy in Ireland under Phillipson's (2008) categories of product, process, and project helps to explain how linguistic imperialism can be seen in an internationalised higher education setting. Firstly, Product refers directly to Irish higher education as a distinct entity, even with its many components, such as location, history, and membership of the European Union. Process, the second component, aligns with the initiation of policy and the numerous features which seek to modernise and internationalise the higher education environment. Next, Project reflects attempts to develop Ireland as an important participant in international higher education. These are attempts to legitimise Irish higher education through participation in an established market where acceptance or success may be based on factors which do not necessarily reflect the experiences of those involved.

Product, Process and Project can be visualised in a triangular form, whereby each element maintains the integrity of the internationalised system. This has been visualised in Figure 4 below. Some systems will have more focus on different areas, but will still rely on others to maintain stability. In the case of Ireland, there is a focus on the product, which is Ireland, and the project of attracting more students and enhancing reputation. The process, which involves actually enhancing Irish higher education, is yet to gain sufficient attention as it is still somewhat unfamiliar. However, in implementing the product, process, and project of internationalisation strategies, policy neglects inclusion of a fourth element which is essential for any system to work, and that is people. People as a category cannot be clearly defined, organised, or directed but policies which rely on people, such as the cases implemented in Irish higher education, require greater trepidation when being drafted.

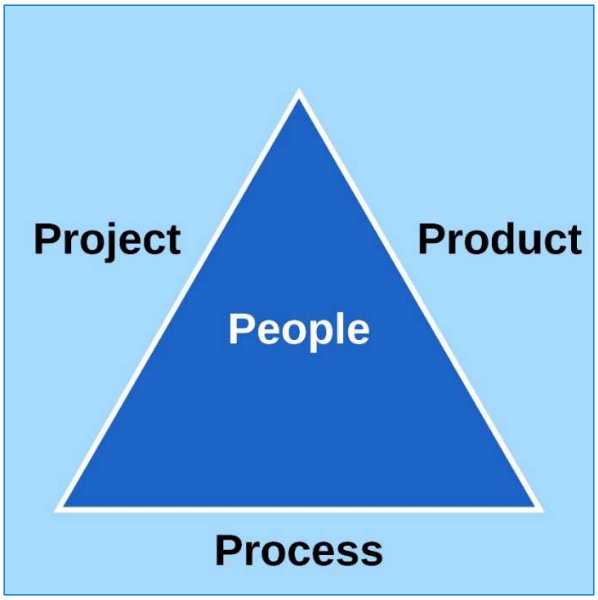

Image 2: Triangular interpretation of Phillipson's (2008) product, project, and process, with people included

De Wit and Leask (2015) challenge all stakeholders by declaring that internationalisation should drive innovation, quality, inequality, and open new opportunities for all. For profit approaches operate beyond the needs of modern globalised higher education, and a form of internationalisation which fulfils all aspects of educational development is desirable. Despite interest and intentions in

Ireland, Ryan (2020) explains that internationalisation beyond student recruitment remains underdeveloped and inconsistently applied as it is hampered by a lack of direct funding to support initiatives.

Through deliberate actions observed in the creation of an individualised and specific policy on Internationalisation, Ireland will be seen to have generated a product, process, and project which reflects Phillipson's (2008) definitions. The role of product, process, and project is to support Irish attempts to benefit from what Altbach and Knight (2007) have called a 'two-way street' of internationalisation. This is characterised by students travelling to overseas destinations, and higher education providers offering lucrative overseas education opportunities. Even with growth, change, and expansion of internationalisations practices, the movement of students is the most distinct and competitive element. The students, people, must be considered when applying policy on internationalisation as one of the most significant stakeholders, but it is apparent that there is no instrument to conduct or collect experiences of students within Irish policy. It remains to be seen whether this understanding will change.

3.3 New Techniques Involved in Monitoring and Implementation of Policy

Internationalisation policy applied a range of techniques to aid the successful implementation of policy. These included the use of focused branding and marketing overseas through established networks, using data to inform decisions on policy actions and the introduction of strict standardisation procedures. These had a mix of impacts on the functioning of IGR and IEGC.

3.3.1 Branding and Sales of Irish Higher Education

IGR prioritised the relaunching of the *Education in Ireland* brand as one of the core steps of a means of presenting Ireland as a destination to study overseas. *Education in Ireland* was originally part of the *Internationalisation of Irish Education Services* report, but with IGR, the management and responsibility for *Education in Ireland* brand and website was handed to *Enterprise Ireland. Enterprise Ireland*'s role largely focuses on promoting Ireland to overseas investors, and its specialisation in building and developing international strategic

partnerships was viewed as important (DES, 2010 p. 39). Due to the perceived success of other brand initiatives, such as tourism, which focused on the strength of Irish people with characteristics of collaboration, creativity and innovation, a similar approach was initially agreed as satisfactory. To communicate Ireland as a positive educational environment would involve highlighting Ireland as a collaborative and innovative society, as well as pointing to Ireland's unique cultural heritage. This would mean that a national image would become part of the promotion of higher education.

An idea of a national image for Ireland has been developing since the turn of the twentieth century, and a national brand carried many similarities. Clancy (2011) suggests that community, sociability and creativity represent an established view of Irish national identity, and this can be directed towards those seeking an alternative, even spiritual experience. Historically, Ireland has tried to present itself as an alternative to modern society, one which is rural and undeveloped, as a way of standing apart from Britain, and this image has worked well (Clancy, 2011; Fanning, 2011). IGR wished to establish Ireland and its higher education sector as a new alternative and as a niche destination for people seeking something different. Policy texts describe an English-speaking location which offered an 'unparalleled experience to students and will add significant value to their career outcomes' (IGR p. 27). These descriptions and directions mirror traditional branding of Ireland to overseas visitors or investors, and some phrasing is noted as resembling a sales approach, rather than an educational strategy. Attracting university students on such a large and focused scope is quite different from attracting investment from overseas organisations.

3.3.2 Using Overseas Networks

New markets were seen as necessary, and more resources were to be provided so that the various stakeholders could remain competitive. IEGC utilised the embassy and alumni networks as a means of outreach for attracting new students, as both are now considered important for building long-term networks. Data is viewed as key, and universities, especially, have been empowered to both maintain details on these students but also generate a more effective image of the university for attracting new students. This approach was initiated during IGR's policy cycle where building lasting relationships was an objective. However, it was not explicitly stated how this may be achieved. From a close reading of IGR, it can be suggested that stakeholders were unsure how to foster the lasting relationships with international students, but it could be worked out eventually. The idea to approach alumni was a result of the *Global Irish Economic Forum*. It was reflected that

alumni could be used to help both the understanding of the Irish brand and also to build the alumni as a resource for actions such as internships, jobs and other opportunities (DFAT, 2015). This consideration was deemed sufficient to explore the development of alumni networks as a focal point for future higher education strategy for promotion and growth.

The approach to connect with alumni encourages a stronger understanding of what it means to be a student in Ireland. It acknowledges that international students are attracted or encouraged to study in particular destinations for a wide range of reasons and that students seek to study in places which they can feel comfortable in. Glass (2018) suggests that a student's identity is impacted by their experiences of moving between multiple spaces and is not just two different countries. This multilocality includes their university space, but it is only one of many different localities which influence students' perceptions. This is intrinsically linked with their own sense of belonging. Understanding this connection cannot be established by analysing the data gathered at national level, and stakeholders have not attempted to consider alternative methods for collecting and analysing the experiences of students in Ireland.

Through alumni connections, there is a sense that the understanding of how to best attract international students is maturing. The need for sustainable increases is emphasised, and this is evidenced by the increased roles of embassies and local knowledge through alumni. Such an approach points to a stronger understanding of the complexity, diversity and competitiveness involved in attracting students from overseas.

3.3.3 Legislative Measures – An Ongoing Issue

Education in Ireland's message, as explained in both strategies, to potential students has been that Ireland is home to world-leading higher education providers. To support this position, both IGR and IEGC have prioritised the revision and implementation of the quality assurance process which should support future recruitment of international students. It is claimed that much of this is already in place, and Ireland's participation in the Bologna Process and membership of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) means it adheres to a recognisable standard when awarding degrees and other qualifications. However, quality can only be measured on courses of study and their content, and this has no impact on other influential factors which may determine student recruitment in Ireland.

3.3.3.1 International Education Mark

Both IGR and IEGC have prioritised a standardised international education sector especially for the recruitment of students. This was initially described as a quality mark or 'Q Mark'

(see: 2.1.1.3 Approaching International Education Strategy) but was soon labelled the International Education Mark (IEM). This was first announced as a key priority in 2009 and has functioned as a central component of both strategies since the outset of IGR. Government has deemed full regulation of the international education sector as necessary for protecting Ireland's brand image. Despite the importance of such a step, it has yet to implement a keystone element in the internationalisation project.

The IEM functions differently from a tool of educational enhancement. It can be argued that the IEM is devised as a tool for monitoring immigration of students, rather than one which enhances their educational experiences. The initial 2009 code of practice for international students (see: 2.1.1.3 Approaching International Education Strategy) remained in place in 2010 but was replaced in 2015 by the QQI *Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Education and Training to International Learners* (QQI, 2015). The central and key upgrade to this code of practice is the statutory involvement of QQI, which possesses the authority to grant licences to education providers. If a provider wishes to recruit students from overseas, the code of practice must be implemented. However, the guidelines within are still used for assessing whether an organisation or institution is suitable for sponsoring international students' education visas (QQI, 2015). Despite being a document stipulating accountability for managing international student intake and support, any reliable mechanism for evaluating and monitoring the quality of experience is absent from the code of practice. The quality of experience includes how students are recruited, welcomed and supported while studying in Ireland, but Irish approaches are without evidence from other similar national strategies, and direct input or feedback from students is absent. While the principle that a positive learning environment which integrates all learners is enforced, there is little to indicate the standard that should be met. This discrepancy is also present in both IGR and IEGC, where suggestions are made on what is expected, but there is little to indicate how measures can be effective. Clarke, Yang and Harmon (2018) highlight this issue, noting that even when universities have applied the required pastoral and integrational actions, students reported that there was a disconnect between Irish and international students. If there is a system to evaluate the quality of systems in place to support international students, the standards should prioritise student input. Setting expectations for the quality of support for international students is a valid step, but they must address the issues which students experience.

3.3.3.2 Concerns Regarding Standardisation

Both government strategies viewed the role of the HEI as an essential component of international student experience but have determined this factor requires supervision through the IEM. Despite long-standing development of the IEM, the legislation has not been finalised, but the international education sector has developed in Ireland without the formal requirement for the standardisation mark. For international student recruiters to continue without specific guidance on quality assurance is confusing, given that the IEM was first proposed in 2009-10. It remains unclear as to whether it will be valued by students who choose Ireland.

Quality assurance is guided throughout the European Union by the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* (ESG). This links the need for quality assurance back to the EHEA and Bologna, where formal standardisation is an obligation under commitments in this area. Interestingly, it is stated that the autonomy of the institution is integral to quality assurance, while quality assurance must remain free of influence and independent of third parties (ESG, 2015; Bischof, 2018). If it is the case that universities and quality assurance organisations operate within the current structures put in place and all are satisfied, then another layer of quality assurance at an educational level may overcomplicate the system. However, Zapp and Ramirez (2019) use the EU as an example to argue that within the regimes of higher education there are various conventions formalising provision, but they actually represent the EUs 'authoritative level of decision-making' (p. 487). What is explained is a higher education sector which is viewed as greater than the individual institutions, and in this, we may encounter students choosing a location over an institution. The result is a distinct advantage for wealthier economies and educational providers which can take advantage due to their familiarity with systems and ability to adapt. If an education standard is comparable across borders, advantages will teeter toward elements which cannot be accounted for through standardisation, such as the language which the education is taught through. In this case, Irish government likely considers the IEM as a key element in raising the profile of the national system and matching fellow European nations. As it has yet to be implemented, it cannot be said to improve the standard of education for international students in Ireland.

Regardless, without the IEM, the standard of education and experience in Ireland were seen as attractive by many up to this point. While the IEM would oblige educational providers to meet established standards, it appears that the background to this was to regulate

immigration to education providers. In addition, government seeks to use standardisation to robustly situate Ireland within the standards of the EHEA and Bologna.

3.6 Concluding Remarks - Monitoring the Success of Policy

Irish higher education recognised that more international students and greater engagement in internationalisation could enhance the quality of education. However, the drivers behind these policy initiatives are not explained in any other way except as economic. Early targets for the success of the policy included an increase of the number of international students in the country, and also, a greater economic contribution from these students was predicted (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2010). Such targets failed to stipulate the means and extent to which they could be achieved. This has been shown to be problematic but unsurprising, due to the ways in which Irish higher education was to be rearranged. Above all else, internationalisation is seen for its specific value to the economy, and policy was uncertain that Ireland had the ability to meet the expectations of increased numbers of international students.

Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Introducing the research

The objective of this research is to understand the position of international students enrolled in Irish universities and ascertain how their lived experiences correlated with the aspirations of government policy on increasing internationalisation in Irish higher education.

The objectives are based on the responses to three research questions. These questions are:

Why do international students choose to come to Ireland and how do their experiences meet with their expectations?

How is the Irish government's intention to develop global citizens compatible with international students own educational objectives? Is the learning relevant to the students' aspirations?

In what ways can increased awareness of the needs and demands of international students impact the development of Ireland's international education environment, and can Ireland's own social and historical experiences lend to this learning process?

The findings aim to offer a perspective on the changing outlooks of international students enrolled in Irish higher education institutes, which to date have yet to be been obtained in significant detail. There is insufficient data which provides an in depth understanding of the students who choose to study in Ireland, and the lives they experience while in the country. The strategies which have looked to actively recruit students from overseas and enhance higher education were the first of their kind in Ireland, and the background is an important aspect of this study. However,

these must be analysed from the position of students who have decided to study in Ireland.

This study shall use the lived experiences of students from overseas studying in Ireland to support this research. The following sections shall explain why completing research in this way is important, justify decisions on research, and detail the process by which the research will be conducted and analysed.

4.1.1 The importance of collecting experiences directly from students

Experience and the understanding that research brings can be the basis for comprehending human behaviour. This is representative of Dewey's (1991) understanding of experience which he sees as learning from our actions and the actions of others, although not exclusively because actively researching is a result of a decision by a researcher to research. Greenberger et al. (2021) suggest that to effectively research requires a transparent and reflexive approach which can help to underpin the value or quality of experience, while the way to communicate the knowledge obtained is important for recognition of the research. Equally, Loch and Black (2016) see the researcher who carries great value as his or her own will is represented in the studies where experience is seen as requisite. While some research may be demanded or required, a researcher may see other forms as necessary. In this project there is an attempt to extract understanding from the lived experiences of students who reflect on their time in Ireland by sharing their stories of learning in Irish universities. From these stories, Barkhuizen (2014) recommends that researchers attempt to prioritise the participants' stories to be communicated independently and unrestricted by the rules some methodologies require. This could be a challenge in the Irish setting, as Gibson and Hazelkorn (2017) explain that research in higher education is no longer the preserve of higher education, but a tool of economic necessity which drives innovation and job growth. Based on this, in-depth study and analysis offers the chance of application across different circumstances and has relevance to a wider audience. It is important that there is a diversity of approaches to research to allow for varying

outcomes. These applications can be found in the paradigms applied in educational research.

4.2 Research paradigms

In educational research, paradigms are epistemological positions on how knowledge is acquired and interpreted, with a focus on the researchers' expected outcomes. Understanding the paradigmatic approach informs the collection and analysis of research data and includes important epistemological, ontological, and methodological features. The epistemology behind research includes the reasons why we conduct research, how we carry out research, and the overall objectives of the research. To help the overall interpretation of these features, the classification by Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018) details beyond epistemology and considers ontology and methodology as equally important aspects, and this has been established in this area for some time. Paradigms can be classed in many ways, such as by the aim or objective of the inquiry, the nature of knowledge, how knowledge is gathered, the quality of its collection, and the research values. Ethics, voice, preparation of the researcher, accommodation and hegemony are factors which should determine the type of paradigm chosen to complete research. This allows us to take the worldview of the research into consideration.

4.2.1 Worldviews

Comprehending the experiences of students must be gained by evaluating how the knowledge which forms this understanding is gathered. There are different ways to collect data, in this case the details of people's lives, and data collection which takes an approach that enhances data is a priority. A paradigm defines how knowledge is collected and then understood based on the overall objective of the research, and this research must use a paradigm which can represent the data in a satisfactory way. Creswell (2009) has explained this as a 'worldview', whereby the researcher and the researchers academic background determine the type of research. However, what is described as a 'worldview' may altruistically appeal to our senses, it lacks the robust definition which this analysis requires. Morgan (2007) sees vagueness in the definition of worldviews as it implies that paradigms represent 'virtually everything someone thinks or believes' (p.52), where in reality

the views relate directly to the collection of data for the research study in question.

A paradigm encapsulates the writers' or researchers' philosophical understanding of ways which knowledge is formed and acquired. A philosophy assesses the fundamental differences between what phenomena should be investigated, and the ways this can be implemented. This also includes how the research can be documented, presented, and even discussed. Hammersley (2013) links this description to a diversification of the ways that research is conceptualised, indicating that different paradigms stand opposed to each other. But Morgan (2007) sees the need for coexistence over competition, whereby each paradigm allows for a different approach to research. Either position appears relevant, and this suggests that much conversation relating to paradigms begins in confrontation. This might be relevant to what Lincoln (2010) called 'the paradigm wars' from an era which saw an attempt to rectify concerns regarding how research was conducted. It also acknowledges that sociological and education research needs to approach research from alternative positions.

4.2.2 Epistemology, Ontology, Methodology

The epistemology of a paradigm refers directly to the researcher's beliefs on the nature of knowledge, or where does knowledge originate. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) classify the epistemology as a 'shared belief' (p. 30) within a field of research. This consists of principles which determine the ways in which research is carried out. Largely, the epistemology relates to the researcher's understanding of how knowledge is formed or gathered. Some regard knowledge as absolute and indisputable, with the only condition that it must be collected and then understood. Separate to this, Clandinin and Huber (2002) explain knowledge should be garnered or constructed through individual or shared experiences, but understood or communicated by its presence in storied form, or narrative.

While much discussion has concentrated on the epistemology of the chosen research paradigm, the ontology and methodology of research play equally important roles. Ontology relates to the nature of reality (Morgan, 2007). According to Ormston et al. (2013), this nature is viewed as existing apart or independent of people's beliefs

on it, which is described as realism. Whereas the alternative, idealism, largely views reality as dependent on the people and their socially constructed meanings, and reality must exist within these. The ontology serves to orientate the researcher towards the research problem and allows an approach to research questions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Ontology concentrates on the reality or situation for which research is being conducted, and it accounts for the various factors which encourage or necessitate the collection of data. Reality must be comprehended as a crucial component as this is where the data is gathered and meaning is made.

The methodology could be seen as the nature of enquiry, as it is the way that the data is collected. Methodology is the research as it is carried out and the results it collects. Scotland (2012) indicates that while each paradigm requires a different epistemology and ontology, the conjectural nature of the assumptions that both epistemology and ontology make means they struggle to be empirically defined, which arguably adds to their ambiguity. Due to this, a clear methodology which can only be effectively applied across one paradigm is necessary to buttress both the epistemology and the ontology

4.2.3 Scientific method

Research by the scientific method typically prioritises an experiment and results will be determined by the presence of statistics which typically prove or disprove a hypothesis (Hammersley, 2013). The data which is collected from this process is regarded as quantitative, due to the presence of numerical or countable data. According to Sheard (2018), quantitative data requires datasets from which the researcher must try to build understanding, and quantitative research is often an objective examination of different factors (Creswell, 2009). This method allows for analysis to be free of bias and for controlled responses. By requiring that data be collected through experiments, research requires strict methodological control and measurable results. Hammersley (2013) illustrates that a problem for sociological research is measurement of phenomena cannot be measured in the same ways as weight or temperature, as may be the case in scientific experiments. People make their own assessments based on their situation or condition, and this should be taken account of.

Across social sciences research, the scientific method is related to the positivist and post-positivist paradigms and is representative of a need to address causes and outcomes of situations or phenomena. Creswell (2009) explains that this approach is both careful and objective because it is focused on precise observation and measurement of features in the world around us. Within the positivist and post-positivist paradigm there is a focus on rigor and the experimental process, and this requires the presence of cause-effect relationships (Y. Lincoln et al., 2018). A typical analysis using the scientific method includes existing theory to propose a hypothesis, which would look to be proven or disproven. Data can be collected and analysed for statistical regularities or trends and then used to assess the hypothesis (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Due to the objective nature of this paradigmatic approach, limitations exist as it can be unsuitable for applying across contexts which involve people, or the research may not accurately assess the direct experiences of individuals. This depends on the focus of the research as not all studies need to collect individualised accounts or experiences.

Sociological research diverges from the necessity for universal form and structure and focuses on social phenomena which are influenced by the researchers own history and values (Hammersley, 2007). The individual differences within this creates consequences for the research outcomes, and their acceptance as research. Recognising the different reasons for using different paradigmatic approaches carries weight for research in education.

4.3 The Appropriate Paradigm

The limitations of these paradigms should be made clear in the proposed method of this research, which can be found in the research's purpose. This is to understand the outlooks of international students while immersed in a higher education degree in a university in Ireland. Analysing student outlooks is important to comprehend the effect of higher education on students. The study of international students and higher education is not familiar with the term outlook, but it holds important meaning over similar terms. The epistemological and ontological understanding of this term carries weight here. A person's outlook, by definition, refers to their view or overall perspective from their current position, or their attitude to something.

While it may seem akin to aspirations or perspective, one's outlook fits within the paradigm of this study by allowing the participant to understand their outlook in a way that suits them. These are not semantic details, and differences between outlooks and perspective, or indeed other similarly functioning words, should not be dismissed. Outlooks' epistemologically acknowledges and values the participants lived experiences, while ontologically it can reveal the idealism which guides and decides individual's decisions and actions. Outlooks are active and allow for a person to both aspire to something, hold a perspective, and as may be the case they may not actually want to do either of these. One's outlook is how one views their current situation and the future which lies ahead. The generality of the term represents the epistemological and ontological requirements for this project because it lets participants provide responses which correspond to their experiences in Irish higher education. These are responses to situations which may affect their educational, social and professional futures. A paradigm which can accurately convey and support this project is necessary.

4.3.1 Qualitative research and interpretative paradigm

To complete this research the type of data collected and the way in which it should be collected need to be defined, and then it will need to be analysed. The data collected is qualitative, as defined by Creswell (2009), where it shall help to explore and understand the meaning attached to the experiences of the participants in this study. Choosing an interpretative paradigm establishes a pathway to understanding the outcome of the research which will provide an analysis of the specific lived experiences of a select group of international students living in Ireland. This falls within Hammersley's (2013) definition where the paradigm wants to 'make sense of their environment and themselves' (p. p26) which are manifested by the cultures in which the participants live.

Consider the setting which students from overseas find themselves. In this research, English will be a second language and many will not have used it socially or in educational settings before arrival in Ireland. The participants will have expectations and preferred outcomes, but events or actions in Ireland may change

how each person can engage or interact. Additionally, investigation can provide some evidence of the many factors which determine the outlooks of students while studying in Ireland.

An interpretative paradigm provides the necessary epistemological and ontological tools to approach the collection and analysis of this kind of data. The expectation of this research is to provide a group of international students the chance to record their voice which can be added to discussions in Ireland which centre on internationalisation in the higher education sector. Through this, the research will present an interpretation of the experiences of these individuals from the conversations which took place, and this is an important component of the interpretative paradigm (Y. Lincoln et al., 2018)

The decision to conduct research in this way means that serious questions about creditability can be answered. This analysis should convey that the results of the experiences of each participant were communicated effectively throughout the research, and this includes addressing, minimising, and negating personal biases (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). However, the interpretative paradigm must accept that biases are present. Essential to this is the sentiment in interpretivism that what we know cannot be detached from the individual and his or her own experiences, as these lived experiences have characterised each person (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2018). The 'inquirer and inquired are fused into single entities of the process of interaction between the two' (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2018 p.115), so the inquirer can also facilitate the inquired to share their reality and how it interacts with the world around them. Interpretivism, as indicated by these descriptions, is ideal in this research as the opportunity for participants to share their lived experiences as a student in Ireland.

4.4 Concluding remarks

Choosing an interpretive paradigm offers the research a distinct advantage as it will provide data which addresses the lived experiences of the participants. This is important as it provides a voice which in infrequently heard during conversations relating to international students in Ireland. The epistemology and ontology of this research will focus on the particular events or actions which shape students

experiences and determine how they view the outlooks as they continue to study in Ireland.

Chapter 5

Methods

The Irish government policy has laid the path for more enhanced internationalisation, and this is largely represented by attracting greater numbers of students from overseas. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of students who the government strategy has focused on attracting. The research shall use narrative analysis to understand the responses to semi-structured questions of international students from China. By conducting an interpretative study using qualitative data from interview transcripts, the data in the form of student's experiences and narratives will help to comprehend the outlooks of international students who are studying in Ireland. This is an empirical study which will focus on the lived experiences of international students who are undergraduates and postgraduates, all of whom come from China.

5.1 Chosen methods

When considering the approach to this research semi-structured interviews with participants were viewed as the preferred means of collecting data which could communicate their lived experience. However, implicit in the research is the requirement to understand the developing outlooks of students, which means that the students experiences should be catalogued over an extended period. As stated, the objective of the research would dictate the choice of paradigm, and this choice would decide the method by which the data would be collected.

5.1.1 Narrative analysis as a method of enquiry

Research shall analyse the answers to questions which are communicated narratively and collected from participants. Semi-structured interviews at key stages in the participants initial year of study in Ireland, which contextualises the data temporally and spatially, have been chosen as the way to collect data from which narrative analysis will be employed. Cortazzi and Jin (2020) explain that

these elements should be present to contextualise the form, function and meaning of the participant's evidence. Students will have spent some time in Irish universities and will have already had various experiences. Bell (2002) suggests that narrative meets the expectations of the interpretative paradigm as it helps people makes sense of their lives as they constantly flux and change as new events happen. Clandinin and Huber (2002) explain narratives as three dimensional constructs consisting of temporal, situational, and social significance, meaning that narratives are influenced by the time they occurred, their location, and those who participated. They are the stories created by participants who have interpreted events as they have happened to them, and narrative enquiry seeks to explore these stories within their deeper context and interlocking relationships. Additionally, Canagarajah (1996) points to narratives possessing a holistic character which represents an alternative knowledge to that gathered from elitist sources, namely positivistic research, and analysing these will offer numerous insights. This research is conducted by a researcher who is emotionally, ideologically, and ethically responsible, and one who could be seen as a co-participant by the nature of their intimate relationship with the research. This relationship is described by Barkhuizen (2011) as one which elicits, constructs and interprets lived experiences to give coherence and clarity to the complexities within the data provided. Through this process meaning is made of the data which can be communicated in an appropriate manner.

5.1.2 Semi structured interview questions

Narrative provides the participant with greater control of their responses and allows them to control the data shared with the researcher, thus allowing them to decide how they participate. This could be considered a flaw, as such methodological flexibility or reflexivity could allow for misrepresentation or poor interpretation of the data, especially with novice researchers. However, the ability of narrative to create understandings connects with each participants identity, which Clandinin and Huber (2002) describe as 'a storied life composition'. Lives and experiences are communicated narratively, essentially as stories, and as such the experiences and lives of research participants must be considered in the same way. To compliment this position, Loch and Black (2016) ask that research be conducted more mindfully,

and that researchers reconsider their personal, professional, and academic lives and to explore how they interact with their own identity as a researcher. In this case, the researcher is also a participant in the student narratives which emerge.

To grasp the full extent of the function of narrative analysis, personal reflection is helpful to craft a meaningful contribution from each research participant and to aid establishing a connection, which Cortazzi and Jin (2020) see as holding an important function. They see the teller's story as dynamic and interactive which depends on particular contexts, and this can depend on who is being told. This gives the researcher a unique responsibility when interpreting and analysing data as the storied lives of participants in their own contexts can be extracted and interpreted to provide a rich source of information for understanding. When the stories collected are those of the lives lived by the research participants, there can only be the truth which was experienced and explained by participants.

5.1.3 Interview questioning

Data was collected for this research by using two semi-structured interviews at key stages during the academic year. Semi-structured interviewing consists typically of a series of open-ended questions which allow for the participant to discuss the answers by relating them to their own circumstances. The questions were drafted based on both the research questions and objectives, but they are also based on the researchers own academic and professional knowledge. In the case of this project, personal experiences working closely with international students in Ireland, living overseas in east Asia for many years, detailed analysis of Irish internationalisation policy and the role of the English language in the EU and South Korea, sufficient background was present to draft appropriate questions. This process meets the requirements of Kallio et al. (2016) whereby previous knowledge be a feature which provided a 'comprehensive and adequate knowledge of the subject' (p. 2959). This allows for not only a more critical approach to the research but also helps interviews to be conducted with more substance.

For narrative analysis, the semi-structured questions can be interpreted in structured form if Labov's (2013, cited in Carbozzi and Jin, 2020) linguistic model of narrative is used. This model focuses on the rhetoric of the response and can be

applied in multiple settings with no prescribed order, and this encourages exploratory or probing questions. Using questions to establish the abstract (general 5meaning), orientation (time, location, etc.), complication (crisis, problem, event or turning point), evaluation (revealing the teller's understanding or meaning), result (the resolution or next stage), and coda (the signalled ending) allows researchers to explore the narratives in their many forms. This model is common in studies involving education and especially foreign language teaching. The structure is simple and flexible, but the focus on the complication may direct interviews towards negative responses or stories, which is seen to be an issue with research in international students (Tran and Vu, 2018). Johnstone (2016) also cautions that Labov saw that narratives can be shaped depending on the audience so interviewees can be seen in a respectable way. In these cases, caution is advised and it is important to use questions to explore all elements of the participants experience.

There are a number of other expected outcomes from this method of questioning. Semi-structured interviews should include a series of questions which are loose or open-ended and carry the expectation that they will encourage conversation as much as they will generate detailed answers. Galletta (2013) explains that the open-ended questions allow participants the room to narrate their experiences, however the questions must be closely related to the desired research outcomes. It should be noted that responses or data cannot be anticipated, so the researcher should focus on maintaining clear and distinct understanding with each person spoken to.

While it can be beneficial for the interview to resemble conversation, semi-structured interviews are made distinct by the questions asked which allow for an exploration of the participants experiences on the chosen topic. Some of this exploration involves listening, probing, noting and responding to key details, while attempting to maintain a 'short list' of participant comments and statements which respond to the interview questions (Galletta, 2013). In addition, a successful interview will see the participant guided through to focus on their experiences as answers to the interview questions.

Much of the success of interviews relies on the researcher's ability to manage both the questioning, the follow up responses, and all other aspects of the interaction between both interviewer and interviewee. This is important for benefit of the researcher who seeks to illicit answers, but equally for the participant who should be able to trust the researcher that the words they share relate to the research and they are not unnecessarily sharing information without any given structure.

5.2 Responsibilities of the researcher

Prior to collecting data, each researcher must complete a number of important tasks to ensure the data is collected ethically and the interviews are prepared to a sufficiently high standard. The following sections give details on a range of procedures which were completed in advance of data collection.

5.2.1 Ethical Concerns

The research required a full ethical review from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences. As this project would engage face-to-face with people and handle personal and private data, which may or may not be of a delicate nature, permission to interview and collect participants' data was necessary. There were two main concerns from the review; how would the data be collected and in what way would it be stored, and what was the nature of the research and was there an apparent need to carry it out? In addition to completing the University of Glasgow's ethical protocols, it was also necessary to contact the relevant higher education institutes to understand their ethical procedures before deciding to interview students from that institute.

The process ensures that the purpose of the research is transparent, valid and necessary, will be conducted in a way that protects the health and well-being of participants, respects the legal rights of individuals, and that the confidentiality of participants is maintained (University of Glasgow, 2018). These ethical principles are completed with the understanding that this is how researchers should conduct themselves during research. However, McMahon and Milligan (2021) underline important criticism of this process in explaining that this process is often a procedural activity prior to commencing research. Not only is this process accused

of being normative, it can also be challenged in inter- or cross-cultural settings, which has particular relevance to my research. Alternative approaches to considering research ethics that address cross-cultural settings may be necessary, but as a researcher with a distinct professional and social background this provided adequate experience and knowhow to engage empathically and conscientiously with Chinese students. This approach may hold flaws, but it is guided by the over-reaching desire to catalogue the responses of the study's participants as accurately as possible.

The means of data collection for this research was initially through a series of face-to-face interviews at key points during the academic year. The interview length was to be between 30 and 40 minutes, but in some exceptions, these would continue to be an hour. At all times participants could end the interview if they wished. As part of the application the reviewers requested a draft of potential interview questions, and this was supplied. While initially there were 30 questions this was eventually reduced to 20 with additional sub-questions which were divided over two different interviews.

5.2.1.1 Additional precautions regarding data collection

The ethical review application considered that the research would be conducted with students who were not from Ireland, and because of this there was always a likelihood that some may not be in Ireland at chosen interview times. The initial idea to mitigate this was to include in the application alternative options should some be unavailable. If this happened then a telephone or video call software or programme such as *Skype* or *Zoom* may be required. For security, the university asked that a secure programme linked to a university license be used and that only audio recordings be maintained. This security concerned both participant and researcher, as it would protect the participants personal data as recordings would be transferred directly to a university server. For the researcher it meant that a personal account could not be used. These were some of the notable steps that would help to satisfy safeguarding standards and would allow the data to be collected safely and securely.

The specification for phone or internet based interviews had only been included in the emergency that one or two students might need to travel or return home to China. As delays had changed the timeline for interviews, the schedule was now unpredictable. Due to awareness of the mobility and flexibility which international students can show, adding the potential need for phone or internet based interviews seemed like a suitable precaution to take so that time would be saved later. This is important to mention as the end of the research and data collection period coincided with the Irish government's decision to close all educational institutions on March 13, 2020 because of Covid-19. This meant that quick responses were needed for an unpredictable environment. While the significant impact of Covid-19 on Irish higher education campuses will be researched for some time, it has also inadvertently become a factor in the research for this dissertation. Preempting the need to conduct online interviews was a fortunate decision, but it was mostly a success as the participants responded favourably to it.

5.2.1.2 Reflections on the process of ethical review

An aspect requiring criticism in the ethical review process is the amount of time which review took. Overall, the review process was slow and cumbersome and delayed data collection. Initially, the research had been planned for the first academic semester but due to the nature of the ethical review process the application was delayed repeatedly, and this was largely because of administrative requirements beyond the applicant's control. Permission was not awarded until January 2020, which caused numerous motivational speedbumps. While fault cannot be directed at individuals, the University should be aware of the challenges this places on research proposals, which may need to be amended or reviewed. Also, as a novice researcher, there was pressure caused by the delays as it was uncertain when or if any research could be completed.

6.2.1.3. Cultural acceptance of ethical review

Interview participants largely responded favourably to the ethical approach taken. Both the participant information sheet, which explained the purpose and background to the research, and the permission form which all participants had to sign, gave the participants the assurances they required. In addition, privacy and

the need to anonymise each participant were important and all participants showed satisfaction with the measures. Tikly and Bond (2013) explain that western ethical perspectives often do not take account of competing world views, and it may be that ethical expectations are perceived differently. Indeed, the ethical review may not fully consider all ethical concerns of students from different cultures, and research with participants from other cultural backgrounds needs to account for this, even if the ethical review process does not require it. Anonymity, for example, was seen as an important factor for the students from China. Given this initial outcome it was taken that the ethical procedures met the students' standards, however a review of this should be conducted to be able to make this a recommendation.

5.2.2 Choosing research participants

The intention was to interview students from two Irish universities. One was a large university with distinct global brand which actively sought high numbers of feepaying international students, while the second was a smaller university on the outskirts of Dublin. Importantly, both universities feature university rankings and international research output on their websites as indicators of quality and status on a global and European level. As the national policy affected all universities in Ireland, it felt necessary to address the experiences of students who studied across different institutions. Given the size and scope of this project and the resources available, it was not possible to interview students located all over Ireland.

5.2.3 Preparing to Interview

Having been granted permission to collect data through ethical review with University of Glasgow (Appendix A) it was imperative to establish from Irish universities their expectations. Prior to contacting the universities regarding their research ethics procedures, contacts with key individuals were established through networking. It was hoped that support or advice could be offered on conducting research according to the university's standards. There was also the need to formally request interview participants to join the study, and each university's assistance would be required. Having being employed in both universities in varying capacities it was possible to navigate hierarchical obstacles, although these were

not a major issue. It was important when discussing the potential support available that a cognisant research idea and focus was presented, but the conversations also held a practical necessity in gaining support from inside the respective universities. The results of these conversations were encouraging and would make recruiting students more straightforward that initially envisaged.

The situation improved when both Irish universities offered ethical exemptions due to prior ethical approval by University of Glasgow. Contact was re-established with stakeholders in participating universities, and in both cases an email was sent to the international student body in the university requesting participants. The notices requested students from China who were in their first year of full-time study in Irish higher education, and there were no other requirements. For this research, if a Chinese student was a full-time student enrolled in an Irish university in their first year then the participant qualified. This stipulation also included English language ability, as meeting the university's language expectations was deemed sufficient to conduct the interview. The primary objective was to obtain sufficient students for the research and there were no other qualifying criteria expected of participants.

5.3 Interview protocol

Full time university students from China in their first year of study in Ireland in taught programmes were sought. Chinese students in Ireland were considered an ideal cohort, as this nationality of student has a significant presence in Irish universities, but also because the Irish government has selected China as a target market for recruiting students. While not the largest nationality of international student, the population of Chinese students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Ireland has seen steady increases since the implementation of policy. Additionally, successive steps have been taken in Ireland to establish lasting relationships through education with China and with Chinese education bodies. These transnational agreements have been backed by Irish governments and are key aspects of both Internationalisation policy documents, IGR (2010) and IEGC (2016).

All participants were provided with a number of documents by email before the interview. These included Participant Information Sheet (Apendix), a Consent to Interview form, which would be signed (Apendix), and a copy of the interview

questions, and paper copies were given at the interview. It was proposed to participants that each interview would last from 30 to 40 minutes but where necessary it would last up to one hour. Ten open-ended questions, together with a number of sub-questions were drafted for the both first and second interview. The questions sought to explore students' personal experiences choosing to study overseas, study in Ireland, living and studying in Ireland and how their experiences changed their outlooks as they studied in the country.

5.4 Transcribing and coding process

All interviews were managed directly by the researcher. A memoing process was used from the beginning, and this involved familiarisation with the interview data by listening to audio recordings again and elaborating on handwritten notes. Also, answers related to specific questions were compared to establish if any patterns had emerged from interviews which may have been missed during data collection. This stage was then followed by transcription of interview data.

Interview data was transcribed completely by the researcher. This involved listening to audio recordings of interviews, then typing all responses and interactions as they were expressed during the interviews. This process was preferred as it ensured accuracy and familiarity with the data, while also allowing for heightened awareness and a high-quality interpretation of each research participants contribution. This mattered as several participants spoke with strong accents and made frequent grammatical and lexical inaccuracies, which influenced the clarity of spoken English. However, as a researcher with over 15 years of professional experience with second language users of English, comprehending and following the participants was not an issue . Transcriptions accurately represent the speech used by participants, and in some cases, context, stress, and intonation reduced miscommunication and increased the quality of transcription. Above all, producing transcripts conveying the exact language of participants enhanced the authenticity of the participants' voices.

5.4.1 Use of CAQDAS

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was chosen for coding the interview transcripts. As the interviews had been typed fully, the contents and direction of each interview felt familiar, so a quick way of collating themes and ideas was appropriate. By choosing to use software to assist analysis, it is important that the researcher understands the reasons for choosing it, and the methodological implications. Analysis of data in this research required reflexivity, and CAQDAS enables this by allowing for more focus on the data. Woods et al. (2016) explain that analysis is the occupation of the researcher, and reflexivity in data can be supported if a researcher is aware of the extent which software can assist analysis. Reflexivity does not just require a flexible approach to the data, but one which acknowledges and benefits from the researchers understanding of their own strengths, knowledge, experience, values, and paradigmatic concerns.

For this research, the coding process would support and facilitate in-depth analysis of the collected data by using the software, NVIVO. Coding is described as an ongoing process during a research project (Creswell, 2009), where words or phrases as used to interpret various aspects of the data collected. Basit (2003) establishes the procedural steps for coding as noticing phenomena, collecting and analysing examples with similar or common traits or differences, which allows for the creation of different categories. Data was coded reflexively, whereby interviews were read and as patterns and common themes emerged, they were codified under headings.

Further advantages of NVIVO software are extensive and benefited this research. Multiple codes could be applied to responses by participants, which could then be evaluated while taking interacting issues into account. Additionally, this supported the researchers understanding that multiple elements within international students' lives interact and respond with each other, and few aspects are driven or happen in isolation.

Coding was an exciting and rewarding experience in this research as it allowed for relationships and connections to be made between participants experiences. The range and variety of codes pointed to the diversity of lived experiences, but it also

created a distinct picture where themes emerged which could be analysed. NVIVO's usability facilitated this greatly, as segments could be selected, then relevant passages could be coded promptly using a 'drag and drop' functionality. Multiple codes could also be applied to the same passage of data, and this would prove advantageous when unpacking themes to draw connections. Data analysis benefitted and uncovered over 70 different codes, with over 50 references to specific codes in certain cases. For example, the code 'Work', relating to future aspirations of participants generated 55 references, 'being an international student' had 41 references. Many more codes had between 20-30 codes, with examples such as 'studying and learning in English' (28), 'impressions of overseas from China' (31), 'making friends' (28), and 'worldview – mindset' (33). Codes were largely categorised under larger headings, and this allowed for distinctions to be made when considering codes. Using software allowed for themes and ideas to be explored and prioritised during coding.

5.5 Addressing concerns

Questions relating to the relationship between the researcher and the participants will be addressed to explain any concerns which may arise. It has been reported by Brown and Danaher (2019) that despite extensive understanding of the procedures extant within semi-structured interviews, it is important to develop or maintain an approach which is responsive to fostering rapport with participants. Looking to their CHE principles of connectivity, humaneness and empathy is recognisable as an appropriate set of values for an individual seeking to learn about a person's experiences. However, these principles may not suit an interpretivist paradigm. These principles epistemologically allow for conversations to create new conversations and understandings from their outcomes. This does not directly match with the objectives of this research which seeks to use the stories and lived experiences of students in Ireland. Despite this, the three principles strike as helpful and also meaningful points to consider for interviewers, and especially novice interviewers.

5.5.1 Power relationships

The relationship or connection between the researcher and the participants needs clarifying in this study, as the participants are all from one nationality while the researcher is from the host country and does not speak the language of the participants. By exploring these connections, we can position the research effectively by recognising the context and establish both what is already known and what has since been learned (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). This is an important stage in recognising the meaning of this research within the context of other research on the internationalisation of higher education in Ireland. The relationships between stakeholders must be made clear, including that of interviewer and interviewee.

A number of interviews were carried out in what could be seen as a typical interviewer-interviewee relationship, whereby participants were recruited and the first and only time of contact was during the interview. However, a distinct portion of the participants were former students, which indicates a previously established relationship. However, there was no existing academic relationship between researcher and the participants, and all academic or formal teacher-student relationships had ceased prior to contacting the individuals about participating in this research project. It was made clear that participants were under no obligation to participate, and they would receive no gratuity or benefit due to participating, and all participants acknowledged this. This stipulation was made clear through the Participant Information Sheet which was provided to all participants and was a condition of meeting the ethical approval provided by University of Glasgow.

Even though it was made clear to participants that participation would not affect their academic position or progress, our prior relationship may have had some influence on participants joining the research. The established relationship had resulted in the students successfully entering the university they now studied. Also, this established relationship might suggest understanding or awareness of numerous aspects of the participants background which could have resulted in a very different interview. Indeed, it is possible that the participants may not even have thought about joining had no previous relationship been established. However, the previous

academic relationship could be seen as proof that they could trust the integrity of the research.

This may suggest that this research was conducted by an insider. Mercer (2007) explains that an insider researcher is not only someone with the same characteristics as subjects, but also one who exists in shifting continuums which can be dictated by the time and space in which the research is completed. In the case of this research, interviews align with Garton and Copland's (2010) description which suggests that relationships exist within a shared community where relationships have been fostered prior to and beyond the research setting. As a teacher interviewing current or former students for research, the interviewer can be both an insider and an outsider (Adriansen & Madsen, 2014). However, the position of the teacher as researcher extends only to the point where the discussion relates to the classroom experience, and when it moves beyond this the researcher's role changes. Interviewees as students can recognise this and treat the interview based on this changing relationship. Garton and Copland's (2010) assertion is that while the interview process may benefit from previously established rapport, there may be confusion or undermining of the research because of this. This could include cases of interacting differently when talking together or misinterpretation of questions which examine new areas. In this case, a second interview can benefit the research as it could strengthen the role or image of the teacher as a researcher and allow for a revised relationship between both individuals.

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee which was previously between teacher and student presents an interesting position. In this case, the interviewees were former students who had been taught through an international foundation year or a pre-sessional academic language skills course. As the students had moved successfully on to full-time undergraduate and postgraduate courses, it may have appeared the relationship had ended, but in reality it had taken a new form . The students' motivations for participating can be questioned, as whether they felt they were required to participate or that they felt indebted to the teacher in some way can help future studies. Phrasing the relationship in this way is even

problematic, as it does not acknowledge that the students actions may be as simple as wanting to help their former teacher. During the interviews, this was not explored but there were references to the previous relationship but they did not become an issue in any way.

5.5.2 Language

The research intends to offer international students a voice in discussions relating to the impact of internationalisation in Ireland. The researcher is not an international student using his second language both to study and to communicate on a day-to-day basis. How the participant communicates is of concern throughout this research, and from a methodological position the ability of the participant to understand and respond effectively to questions is vital. Equally, the research should not seek to assess participants suitability based on their communication skills and the fairest way to do this was to consider any person who was a full time student as a satisfactory participant. With this standard, the research encouraged all enrolled students to participate, and it accepts that all students have met a minimal English communication standard to enter the university. This should be considered as sufficient for collecting the experiences of willing participants.

There are limitations to this approach. The suitability of English language testing systems as a barometer for English ability are still being discussed. Clark and Yu (2021) assert that the IELTS exam only suggests the test taker is suitable for higher education and offers no further assurances of student competence or confidence using English. While a means of English testing to assess students is necessary, a standardised test for non-standardised learning and life experiences faces challenges related to its efficacy. Despite this, Hyatt (2013) has noted a level of stakeholder satisfaction with the exams, but with reservations expressed about people's understanding of the function of such tests as a process for entering higher education through English.

This understanding is relevant and important to comprehend when facing qualitative interviews with participants who will not use their first language. Language may be one of the participants biggest concerns for joining the interviews. Foreign language anxiety, an long established concern defined by

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), is a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and concern which restricts an individual from performing effectively or achieving a desired goal when using a second or foreign language. Zhang (2019) observed that foreign language anxiety was consistently an issue for learners and users of a second language, and despite proficiency it continued to be an issue. It should be noted also that foreign language anxiety is as common as existing in 30-40% of language learners (Horwitz, 2016). For second language users of English this may mean that they may feel more than extra pressure when communicating in English settings. This may result in questions being misunderstood or answers which lack fluency or clarity.

This study is an interpretive study which will rely on the researchers' ability to communicate effectively with participants. This could include responding to limitations in participants ability to express themselves or mispronunciation when a participant is speaking. This research does not require an analysis of pronunciation or sentence formation by Chinese second language users of English, because it diverts from the point of what the participant is talking about. There may be an implication that through so-called errors of patterns of speech, the retelling of their experiences could be diminished. While the way that they retell their experiences is of the highest importance, it should be addressed in relation to participant identity and relationship they have with English.

As researcher, the collecting and understanding of responses relies on the ability to empathically relate to the participants through personal and professional experiences of living and working overseas. Also, the researcher is an experienced professional in the area of academic language skills delivery and production, and any miscommunication between participant and researcher can be addressed during interviews. This background is also of importance when collecting and understanding the responses received. The analysis shall prioritise understanding the experiences of its participants and in doing so gain an empirical understanding of their situations.

5.6 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on research.

Covid-19 had a significant impact on this research. Data collection began in February and March of 2020, which coincided with the heightening of awareness and later implementation of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Irish government's reaction had an immediate outcome on the path this research was to take. Emergency measures to restrict the spread and impact of Covid-19 were introduced by the Irish government in March 2020 (Department of Education, 2020). This included the closure of all educational establishments from March 13. Students had to complete their studies remotely and away from group settings, while any face to face interactions were strongly advised against.

All participants in the research expressed extensive awareness and a strong understanding of the consequences. During data collection, several participants referred to their experiences of comprehending and dealing with increased awareness of covid-19 and being Chinese. In certain cases the participants referred to racist or discriminatory actions and language due to their Chinese nationality, and also to a lack of empathy from those around them when such actions occurred. Importantly, all participants were conscious of the threat the virus posed and wished to avoid unnecessary infection or transmission. By the time government actions had been put in place, nine of twelve interviews had been completed but an urgent solution was still required to complete all the interviews.

Delays to the interview schedule were limited. When initially making plans to interview, it was a concern that participants may return to China. For this reason, ethical approval included a request to use video conferencing should it be necessary, and no issue was made during application. It was requested that only audio data be stored, and storage of video files was forbidden. This requirement was reiterated during consultations with partnering universities regarding ethical clearance to interview, and it was made implicit that the participant information sheet be clear that only audio files would be stored. *University of Glasgow* monitored *OneDrive* was considered satisfactory in this case, as this met the expected security standards. These steps allowed for the research to continue with minimal interruptions.

Online interviews were conducted using the video conferencing programme, *Zoom*. Initial actions were regarded positively by participants, and during the first online interviews', satisfaction was expressed by participants concerning the prompt reaction in the face of the threat from Covid-19. Participants appeared comfortable talking across video software, both because of safety and convenience. In total, three interviews were completed for the first interview, and all second interviews were conducted online. Internet connectivity did not cause a significant issue and participants were happy to work around lags in connectivity if they did occur. Online interviewing was flexible and allowed for several participants to conduct their final interview from China.

5.7 Concluding remarks

The methods of research have encountered significant attention through the variety of ethical review procedures, and due to this it was expected that all concerns were addressed beforehand. While the outbreak of Covid-19 was unpredictable at the time, satisfactory measures had been implemented. The interviews were conducted according to the protocol and the data was stored in a responsible manner. In addition, while there were concerns relating to the collection of data, these were addressed beforehand. Following the collection of data and their subsequent transcription, the data was analysed and the results are presented in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Presentation of Findings

6.1 Introduction to findings

The research is concerned with the developing outlooks of international students in Irish higher education institutes, and the use of semi-structured interviews was the chosen method for collecting data. In total there were 12 interviews, and these were conducted between the months of February and September, 2020. All direct quotations are reported as students shared them in interviews, and this is to maintain the integrity of their voice. Explanations which followed are intended to give context or interpret what the participant meant.

6.1.1 Research participants

Students who were from China in their first year of study in Ireland made up the participant sample. The sample presents a range of students from different backgrounds, and this includes course of study, age, gender, and professional or educational experience. The objective was to collect opinions on study and living in Ireland as a so-called international student from China.

Each participant has been randomly allocated a common male or female name in Ireland. Names in English were chosen to avoid misuse or stereotyping of Chinese names. In initial email communication general demographic details were established and there were no instances of misgendering based on this early communication. The remaining details are provided to show degree type or level of study. The participant code is a simple system which indicates level of study and an order in which participants were interviewed, and the researcher is only aware of this order and connection. There is no document or record connecting the real names and their pseudonyms, participant code, or any other identifying criteria. This anonymity was an important aspect of earning the trust of participants. Table 1 below breaks down the makeup of the participant list.

Assigned name	Participant code	Gender	Status	Degree of study
Niall	1P	Male	Postgraduate	MA
Damien	2U	Male	Undergraduate	BA
David	3U	Male	Undergraduate	BSc
Declan	4U	Male	Undergraduate	BSc
Mary	5U	Female	Undergraduate	BSc
Joanne	6P	Female	Postgraduate	MA
Julie	7U	Female	Undergraduate	BA
Sandra	8P	Female	Postgraduate	MA
Niamh	9P	Female	Postgraduate	MA
Ray	10P	Male	Postgraduate	MSc
Laura	11P	Female	Postgraduate	MSc
Sarah	12P	Female	Postgraduate	MSc

Table 4: Details of participants in study

Study overseas has been a long term objective of many of the participants of this research study. The decisions which the participants made to decide on study overseas took different directions, the analysis of interviews will prioritise themes which emerged while discussing the participants' experiences. While there were scripted questions, the nature of the interview process allowed for a diverse range of answers and responses which reflected the interpretation of questions. The reflexive nature of this experience has provided an account of the decision-making process of a sample of international students who come to Ireland from China, and this presentation of findings will attempt to proffer an understanding.

6.1.2 Introduction to themes

Themes which emerged from interview data need to be understood according to their scope, which is the story or connection of the theme to the broader research

questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes and scope will be defined by their content, and this will allow for each theme to reflect the essential characteristics. It is important for this interpretive analysis that the themes represent the diversity of responses to interview questions and the scope of themes is a reflection on this. Reflexive analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2019), relies on familiarity with the data and the theoretical and philosophical assumptions which may arise. This calls for a constant questioning of the researcher's analysis which must be reflective and thoughtful.

The themes which emerged from the interviews have helped to build understanding of the lived experiences and developing outlooks of the participants in this research. Through analysis, the data provided five themes which respond directly to the research objectives. The five themes are categorised as:

- Experiences
- Being a Chinese student in Ireland
- Role of the university
- Social networks
- Career benefits

Coding and analysis established these key themes which emerged from the responses. However, these themes proved difficult to isolate from each other and there was much overlapping of ideas and themes. Being a Chinese student in Ireland, as an example, cannot effectively be considered without talking about the role of their host university or the person's hopes for the future career.

When deciding on themes the relationship to the research objectives is central and themes should be selected based on their ability to offer constructive responses to the research. The research questions and the interview questions were drafted with the objective of building understanding from within student responses, but because of the nature of the interview process and the variety of experiences of each participant, answers vary greatly. This reflexivity within the data is an important aspect, and for these reasons the scope of each theme must be definite and

accurate so themes can provide a basis for interpretation. The reflexive understanding provided by the themes which have emerged can be examined in the Figure 3 below.

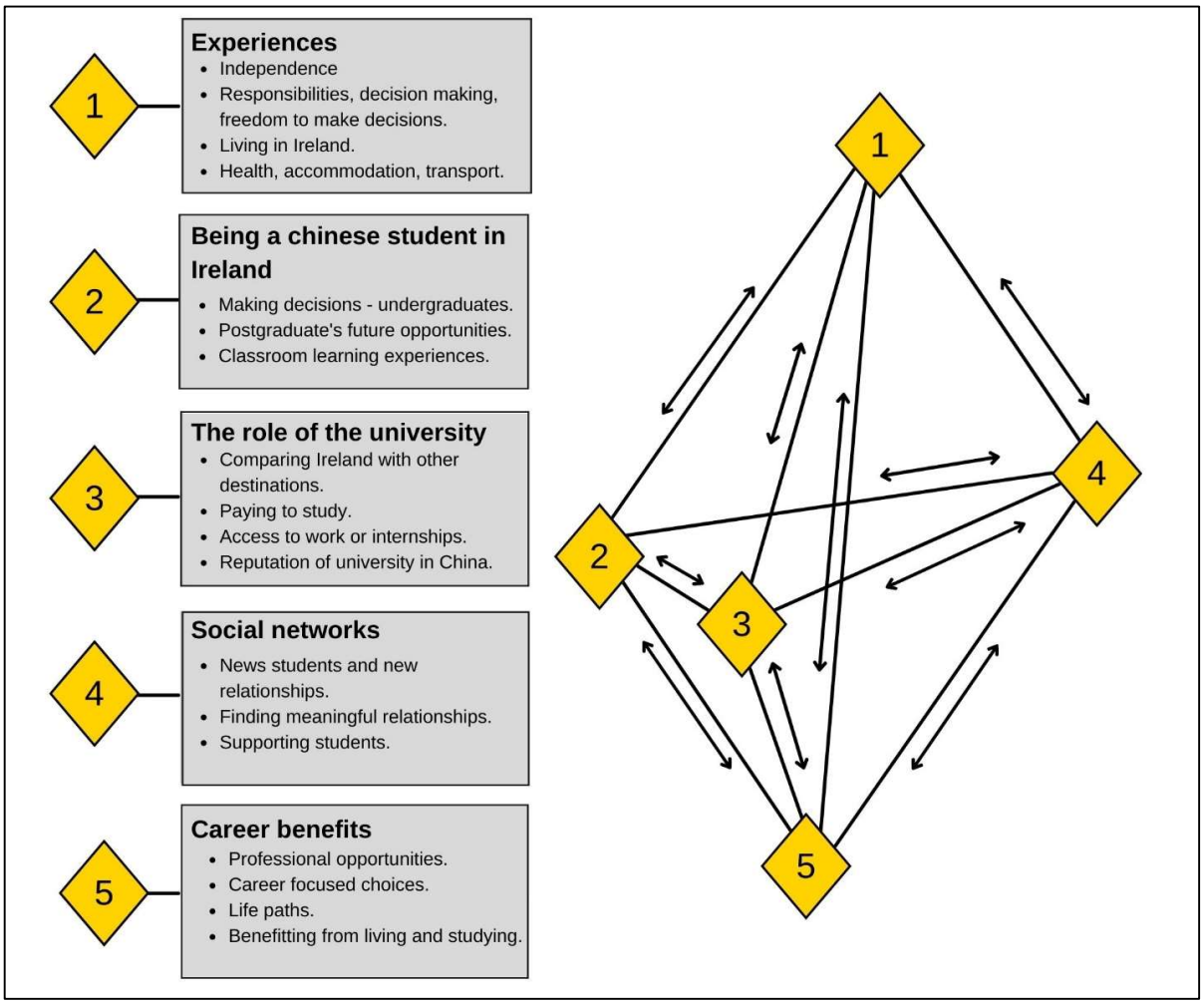

Figure 1 Visualising the transferability of topics and ideas within the themes.

6.2 Defining the themes

Establishing five themes through analysis of the data gives the opportunity to offer responses to the research questions. This allows the research to maintain a focus that could be limited by the many disparities between individual responses to interview questions, which is representative of the different backgrounds of each participant, their lived experiences, and their developing outlooks as international

students in Ireland. The themes categorise and maintain a sense of control over the data.

Theme	Scope
Experiences	• Experiences are not viewed exclusively as completed actions but as current, ongoing, and incomplete processes. • Can be physical and emotional, but shape all aspects of a student's outlook towards the future. • Responses collected based on daily activities and study aspirations.
Being a Chinese student in Ireland	• Explore learning and life as experienced by international students from China. • Interpretations provide insights to mentality, development and growth as students and individuals. • Evaluation of expectations and experiences necessary to understand individuals as university students.
Role of the university	• University maintains an important role in all aspects of student development, but students invest time and money in choices. • Students consider how host university operates and its potential influence on their future, such as access to learning and work opportunities. • University fulfils social function which should be analysed.

Social networks	• Friends, classmates, staff, and acquaintances who became part of participants' learning experience. • Relationships are formed which can impact confidence and perceptions. • Networks can be analysed when a lack or absence of relationships is noted.
Career benefits	• Advantages of international study to individual's career are considerable and seen as far reaching and highly individualised. • Variety of social and economic backgrounds allows for a range of outlooks. • Comprehension of impact of work and study experiences for understanding influence of educational targets and aspirations on career.

Table 5 Definitions and explanations of themes which emerged

6.3 Experiences

Experiences of students were described largely in two ways. There were immediate and individual experiences which had very specific circumstances, and there were extended experiences which were felt by numerous participants which had pertinent results on their progression through the academic year. Experiences are formed by the students' individual actions and results of incidents, but as described they come across as being influenced heavily by situations or actions which occurred prior to studying in Ireland.

6.3.1 Independence

Undergraduate students who participated in this research were fully aware of the challenges they faced. However, they conveyed that the opportunity of studying was ultimately a chance to become more independent. Independence is seen as each individual's ability to make decisions and complete actions relevant to their

daily life which previously a parent or other family member may have supported or carried out in the past. For many, doing simple everyday things on their own is an important step to becoming an independent adult. These everyday activities can be seen as small chores, such as laundry, cooking or grocery shopping, but should be noted that they are new responsibilities for many of the participants.

The responsibilities explained are not considered as something daunting or negative. Indeed, participants view these tasks as important parts of the experience of studying overseas as they are away from their traditional support networks, such as family. Upon arriving in Ireland, participants expressed frustration with the need to complete the tasks but strong senses of pride and satisfaction because they had completed the activity successfully. Previously, these same actions would have had the support of a parent or guardian, yet when a student the responsibility rests entirely on the individual. Declan (4U) explained:

> "In China when I met some problems, first thing I want to do is caught help from my family, but in here the only thing you can rely on is your friends, your teachers, yourself. So in here I become more independent." (Declan 4U)

Additionally, Sandra (8P) said:

> "[Y]ou know how to do the laundry, you know how to clean your room, and you make everything neat and clean. I think that is really important because you need to keep your living standard the same, or even better than you live in your home country." (Sandra 8P)

These actions are seen by students as both as important for the future, but equally for the present. Even though international students may view study overseas as an opportunity to get out of their so-called comfort zone, it is important to maintain their own values and standards while living away from home. Sarah (12P), a postgraduate student who experienced working before travelling to Ireland, reflected on her experience of developing greater independence:

> "And my cook ability. I rarely cook when I was living with my parents, because my parents, they are very good at cooking. But when I came here, I had to cook by myself, because the living expose... I have to eat, I have to

> buy, I have to live here […] Yeah, I just think when I just back to my country, I can do, I can live, it's totally independent life. But before I still think I'm the child. I'm a children belong to my parent. Because they will control us, I don't know why. But, still when I was 28 already, they still will control us." (Sarah 12P)

For the student, the importance of independence extends beyond daily chores as faces the reality that even though she may be an adult, her family do not allow her the freedom which a person her age may expect. Despite making many important decisions in her life, she felt that she was not offered the opportunity to take full control of her life because her parents could be worried. What she sees is the chance to experience this independence and perhaps prove to herself that she is capable and she can now look at situations from different perspectives.

It is worth noting that while the majority of participants discussed becoming more independent, some did not travel alone while a number of participants had already experienced studing abroad. Both Declan (4U) and Mary (5U) had lived in Ireland for some time, and both had close family who had emigrated to live in Ireland. Mary (5U) was aware that she was fortunate to have the daily support of her family to fall back on, whereas Declan's (4U) family who had lived in Ireland for some years, were still keen that he would become more independent while studying and living alone in Dublin.

6.3.2 Living in Ireland

All participants were in their first year of study in an Irish university, and in all but a few cases the students had not experienced studying or even living abroad previously. Interestingly, a number of participants had visited or spent time in Ireland before coming as a student, and this seems to have encouraged them to choose Ireland. David (3U), an undergraduate, described visiting Ireland with his mother as a tourist two years before coming to study. He was given a favourable impression, and even though Ireland may not be well known in China, because it is an English speaking country it met one of his criteria for studying overseas. Additionally, Joanne (6P) spent a half-semester studying in Dublin as an exchange student and in partial completion of her under-graduate degree in China. Even

though a majority of classmates chose to study overseas, she was the only person who decided on Dublin and this was based on her largely positive exchange experience in Dublin. However, she explained that the exchange experience and full-time student experience were quite different.

Reflections on life in Ireland frequently relate directly to services, but these interactions do not ultimately affect the outlooks of students in the country. They are looked at as a convenience or mere fact of daily life, with the weather falling into this same category. The interviews revealed that students accepted that many facets of life would be different and did not expect for them to change to meet their needs. Largely these students had avoided negative experiences regarding health or well-being and spoke positively of the availability of services which mattered to them. Niall (1P), a postgraduate student who was married and had previously studied in the UK, was the main exception as he expressed numerous concerns relating to health insurance and the ability to transfer enough money to live. Health factors, for example, were largely not raised by other students but this does not mean they were not important to them, as students had been fortunate to avoid negative health experiences. In fact, some saw Ireland as being a very healthy country because people were seen exercising regularly (Sandra 8P) and there were many trees (Mary 5U). Niamh (9P) referred directly to mental health counselling which was available through her university, and of the awareness of the challenges mental health brought to students. It meant a lot to her that even those teaching her expressed empathy with the challenges of concentrating during the difficult period at the outset of Covid-19.

While aspects of living in Ireland feature prominently in the responses to questions, it is unclear as to whether these experiences are formative and will later impact students' progression through university. Accommodation is one important area which effects all students' life and lifestyle, and the need for students to live away from their usual support networks highlights its importance. While it is not a factor that impacts students following the end of their studies, a negative experience could devalue the overall experience and negatively influence their progress and academic development.

The postgraduate student Laura (11P) who was based outside Dublin talked extensively of the problems she had in her on-campus accommodation, with the noise at night from neighbours becoming unbearable. She had made arrangements to move, but the conditions had been very stressful and had diminished the quality of her experience. Joanne (6P) also discussed her accommodation but looked on renting privately as an important distinction between her prior exchange student experience in Ireland. She described living in campus accommodation where she felt there was little difference to studying in China because she shared her room and life with 10 fellow Chinese students who travelled with her. When living off campus she felt she was getting a better experience as she interacted with a wider variety of people, yet still relied on her close friend:

> "[N]ow because now I live with my close friends, so I can actually get support from my friends whenever I kind of feel down or uncertain about myself, I can just directly talk to her, and, I'm not saying that we're going to just figure this out, but it helps me a lot. But, when after thinking if I have to live here alone to cope with all this study stuff and working stuff, to some point, you. I believe I can do that, but it's just about how happy you doing thing. What's the point for you to just work and live and study here if you're not that happy?" (Joanne 6P)

Joanne (6P) reflects that the presence of her close friend is an important part of her living experience, where both can share and discuss their daily challenges. Examples have shown accommodation to be viewed not only as a place to sleep or study, but also as a safe environment which students can use to talk or try to work out their daily problems. This was not always explained in this way.

Niall (1P) had moved to Dublin with his wife who had been offered a job in Dublin, and he decided to complete a master's degree while the family settled in to living in Dublin. Having lived in London and Shang Hai, he stated that he was shocked by Dublin's housing costs. He relied on his partner's salary, savings, and other income to get by, but even this was a problem. For Niall (1P), getting caught out by the cost of living in Dublin was something he was concerned over as Dublin was only a

small city by comparison, yet the prices of day to day life were comparable to London.

Despite these accommodation issues, they do not appear to have impacted students' overall outlook or access to other learning or professional opportunities. Joanne's (6P) experience is notable as she looks to the learning gained from sharing her private accommodation with a friend as a source for comfort and security. It is interesting that she raises this, because what she expects of a home – regardless of being a student or full-time worker – is possibly what all students look for. Housing is key for a student who is living overseas, and those who participated in this research who communicated experiences which were sufficiently denigrative or unsettling saw it necessary to raise them during interviews.

6.4 Being a Chinese student in Ireland

The theme emerges as greatly significant as it distinguishes the students' lives in Ireland while studying and living in a university. Chinese students are a distinct demographic in higher education, as they not only have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but there is also physical distance of thousands of kilometres between both countries. In addition, students typically fund their study through their own resources, as distinct from securing scholarships or sponsorship, which means that they are making large personal investments. Study overseas in China is considered by all participants as a necessity for career and social progression in the future, but this section analyses their responses on questions which address their viewpoints as Chinese students in Ireland. While analysing this theme, it was important to ascertain types of experiences which respond to the outlooks of students and how they develop or aid to their personal development.

6.4.1 Decisions and choices while studying overseas - undergraduate experiences

Responses from undergraduate students were noticeably different from postgraduates. There is an obvious age difference between both, but also it came across from responses from undergraduates that they were largely focused on the learning in their courses and were happy that opportunities for work and

professional development would arrive later in their degrees. With two exceptions, both Declan (4UG) and Julie (7U) had both spent time in undergraduate study in China, and had clear expectations of what they required from studying in Ireland. Both expressed varying levels of satisfaction, however they understood the value of learning in Ireland which motivated them in their educational outlooks.

Undergraduate students who were mostly without previous overseas study experience were practical in their decisions. David (3U) recognised Dublin for its prominence as an IT hub and the major multinationals which were situated there. It is worth noting that David (3U) felt that an undergraduate degree in his university taught the same modules and met the same standards as other universities around the world. He proved adept at using this awareness in his classroom learning by using YouTube videos from other teachers or universities to revise or reinforce learning from lectures.

Damien (2U) was studying linguistics but was aware that the subject was uncommon in China. He did not expect to be accepted to his Irish university. He was very proud that he was in Ireland, as he was very interested in early Christian Ireland and Ireland in general. He did however express that the freedom to practice his Catholic faith was of great importance to him, and Ireland could offer him educational and spiritual opportunities.

Mary's (5U) had completed secondary schooling in the United States, but unlike other students she recently emigrated to Ireland with her family. Mary (5U) had chosen a career related to medicine and her choice of course allowed her flexibility towards her future, a fact which appeared both comforting but also unsettling in their own ways.

Declan (4U) took a long route towards undergraduate study having already completed time studying in a Chinese university which he expressed dissatisfaction with. As his parents had lived in Ireland for many years, the family thought it would be good if he came and studied in Ireland also, so he spent a year studying in a language school in Limerick before coming to Dublin where he completed a foundation year. Declan (4U) was very satisfied with his decisions and recognised that his university choice offered him a distinct opportunity which he could never

have availed of had he remained in China. The undergraduate students universally expressed that their options in Ireland had presented real opportunities, regardless of their background or their career aspirations.

Finally, Julie (7U) was an exchange student in her final year of study but her first year of living and studying in Ireland. She had completed three years of undergraduate study in a sister campus in China and the last year of study in Ireland was a prerequisite for her course. Julie (7U) explained that her original choice was to study at home in China despite her parents offering her the chance to study overseas. It was important for her to prove that she could meet the many challenges of studying in China, but now saw the year exchange as vital preparation before going to the United States for postgraduate study. While studying in Ireland was required, she viewed it as an important step in the process for her to become a more competent student and to prepare her for study away from her family and friends.

6.4.2 Future opportunities and necessity for overseas study - postgraduate experiences

Postgraduates discussed the themes in similar ways to undergraduate students. However, many individual's decisions or actions followed the same directions as other postgraduates and elements of these patterns are helpful to understand their mentality. Postgraduate students faced different pressures to undergraduates, as they explained the need for their qualification to offer better employment security or access to a wider range of job options. These students were quite clear in their understanding of what they required academically and professionally, but achieving these goals presented varying types of challenge.

The responses given by postgraduate students, regardless of which university they studied at, were more detailed and extensive. The postgraduate students considered answers to questions reflectively and it was evident that they were willing to communicate the intricate values of their experiences and the opportunities that they hoped studying in Ireland would bring. For postgraduate students, their degree is an urgent and necessary element in their professional futures, and this was communicated universally by all postgraduate participants in

this research. However, this was not the exclusive necessity, and these students also sought experiences which offered value which they could benefit and gain confidence from. However, while many students showed unity in their expectations, they could be divided into certain categories where there were recognisable trends in their responses. Students who had spent time working following the completion of their undergraduate degree expressed very clear expectations and understanding of the worth an internationally attained qualification would bring.

Those who transitioned to postgraduate study directly after completing their degrees reported on their expected outcomes more vaguely. In addition, in postgraduate classes the ways in which students were able to build relationships with students from their course, either international or students from Ireland, followed particular trends which impacted how students valued the social experiences with their class groups. In courses with greater diversity of student, such as different nationality but also a range of academic or career backgrounds, students reported on more engaging situations. Those who joined more close-knit groups showed lower levels of engagement with course mates, and this could be seen with students who joined a programme that had many recent graduates from the corresponding bachelor's degree course. It will be shown that this details a different type of experience.

6.4.2.1 Postgraduates with experience working

Ray (10P) had taken a career break but came across as certain that his qualification would grant him professional opportunities which were previously unattainable. Yet, what stood out what was Ray's (10P) expectation that postgraduate study would position him to function at a higher professional level which he recognised from colleagues who had studied overseas. He explained this by describing people who had greater confidence, seemed humbler, and that they were more internationally minded. He did not doubt that, even though he had quit his job, he would find something better on return to China and this would include a better salary.

Laura (11P) had spent a number of years working as a graphic designer in Beijing, but she recognised that without further study she was unlikely to progress professionally. She saw that her professional knowledge was limited and that she needed more academic understanding to help her solve problems which emerged in her work life. Postgraduate study was not only a chance to look to solutions to these problems, but it could offer her better career progression options:

> Laura (11P): "[…] I want to change my career directions. I don't want to be the normal graphic designer anymore. I want to be, maybe I can use my knowledge to teach some younger generation […] If you want to have leadership you must be have experience, your area, your field. But how do you convince people to trust you? You have to have the higher degree."

The explanation of the need for a higher degree as almost mandatory for career progression is an important factor to discuss. The degree for Laura (11P) and Ray (10P) appears to be seen as an indicator of professionalism which employers in more lucrative companies seek. It is not clear for either how big the professional jump is, but to them this step is important and complements their previous work experience which both value highly. The master's degree is something which they have thought carefully about and can see its intrinsic value. Distinct from students who lacked prior full-time work experience, these students were aware of the advantages of their study choices and were satisfied that their decision to pursue study overseas would be worthwhile.

6.4.2.2 Postgraduates without significant work experience

The students who transferred directly from undergraduate study to postgraduate study spoke with less confidence about their potential opportunities, and they related their expectations to those of peers and others. They were content that their choice was necessary and would offer advantages in their future. However, they voiced their objectives with uncertainty and less optimism than those who had worked prior to beginning their studies.

These students appeared to be experiencing more pressure from their decisions, and this was weighing on them. Master's students could avail of a two-year post-study work visa and this was a factor in choosing Ireland. After living and studying

in Ireland over an extended period, many postgraduate students felt that meaningful work opportunities would be difficult to avail of, which could affect their long-term plans:

> Laura (11P): “And if I can, I want to get an internship or work permit here, but now I don't think it will come true […] I don't think I will get a job here but applied for four or five application, so far but I failed in interview […] I hope I could work, like three or four years. If I can I want to buy an apartment in Dublin, so if I have time, because I don't think I will live here a long time, just on my holidays because I like the weather. And my investment, I think it's my long term goals.”

These working opportunities were of great importance for the objectives of students seeking to return to China in the future, but they form part of a larger personal plan. Laura (11P) maintains the same aspirations as many, where she not only seeks working experiences but also a lifestyle and an opportunity to grow and benefit greatly from the experience of studying and living, and not exclusively rely on her education as a means of development. Like Laura (11P), Joanne (6P) expressed concern about the possibility that she would struggle to source suitable work opportunities which may cause her plans to be changed and this concerned her. Niamh (9P) explained that the need for a good job was superficial but that a good salary meant that other plans or aspirations could be prioritised if she was financially secure, and that social expectations could be met:

> Niamh (9P): “In China it’s very hard to get a high salary job, and maintain your inner peace at the same time, unless you are already 40 or 50 years old […] It's everything, I think. You rely on your high salary. You have the high salary, and you need to remain a social status and you have to compare with other people, so it's very easy for you to break the inner peace in your heart […] If I come to Ireland...I think the society is quite developed. Since Irish society has developed quite well, it's a very mature society. I think I can get a basic income and I can have a quite good life.”

This student explores that idea that her home country and her new home in Ireland grant alternatives to living in society, and considers one as being preferable. This

student has based her beliefs on an assumption she gained prior to travel and study, and this could reflect the student's feelings about her home country and the quality of education that is offered there. In doing this, Niamh (9P) directly addresses social status as she recognises the wider influence of higher education and study overseas in China. Niall (1P) referred to this directly as 'face', whereby people will attempt to seek social parity or to increase their social capital by studying or having family members study abroad. He explained the notion of 'face':

> "I'm just thinking of face, sort of as a cultural issue, about losing face is kind of important to Chinese people. How to earn your face, if your kids are studying abroad, the parents this is always a nice way to earn some face, especially when they share the same news and talk to their relatives and friends. I guess if your family is wealthy enough and they can afford tuition fees abroad, they probably would try to do it […] It's like a class struggle, even though the Communist Party is thinking we are all from the same class, but unfortunately you can never eliminate the class struggle. So sometimes people will say 'if you study abroad, oh if you did that, you are my kind of people', so they create this kind of people, so it's like a clan or something." (Niall 1P)

The influence of 'face' or reputation encompasses relationships with all key groups involved in overseas study – family, friends, and even co-workers and classmates. Indeed, all participants in this study expressed some influence from others who helped them in their decisions about studying overseas. This reveals that the possession of the qualification extends beyond the educational and professional benefits which may be typically expected, but that it is also a societal requisite for participation or membership in desirable circles. While undergraduate and postgraduate students both expressed the presence of this social requirement, postgraduate students were far more aware of its presence and targeted it when applying for overseas study opportunities.

6.4.3 In the classroom – impact of learning experiences of Chinese students in Ireland

It is necessary to explore the specific learning related experiences of students, because the reason why Chinese students choose to come to Ireland is to study. This allows Chinese students experiences to be understood in specific learning situations, and to understand whether the learning experiences and environment meets their needs or abilities.

All students expressed many challenges with learning in the classroom, mostly due to the learning being conducted in English. However, no students saw this as something to be concerned about as it was to be expected when studying in a foreign country. A number of students felt that that they stood at a disadvantage due to their language, but they had developed strategies and means of mitigating and responding to challenges, and again they accepted this as a feature of their study choices.

The interactions with classmates and relationships formed were deemed important by participants. These interactions were significant and varied in the ways that they were experienced and interpreted by students. Finally, the teaching and learning methods were considered by participants to be superior due to the range of methods employed, especially in assessment. The findings presented shall provide a diversity of views which represent the varied experiences of students from China in Ireland.

6.4.3.1 Language and learning

Language was an essential reason for students to choose to study overseas, and also one of the main reasons Ireland featured as an option for students who decided to study overseas. University study overseas offers other chances for students to acquire not only a high level of English, but also the essential foreign language skills which they could use in professional settings when they had graduated. However, even though many explained it as important for finding future employment there were few if any mentions of the need to use English when in employment. It is implied frequently that possession of the qualification from an overseas university,

and especially one in an English-speaking country, is a requisite for seeking new opportunities which may not have been available before. Students felt the opportunity to participate in internships or avail of work experience in the host country would provide lucrative experience. This was considered highly valuable by students when they chose where they wished to study.

Sarah (12P) explained that the opportunities in her master's course were not possible if she studied in a Chinese university. The numerous developmental and professional experiences which were components of her degree programme were more than sufficient. Importantly, she saw these as more meaningful than studying through English. She was very satisfied that the group assessment allowed her to focus on her strengths and benefitted from the multidisciplinary nature of her module. Her strengths lay in graphic design, and she worked closely with students who were engineers, web developers and the likes. While she had very little background in some areas, she could apply her knowledge and skills in a team setting. While language initially felt like an impediment, the group supported her so that she could understand the course requirements. The nature of this course allowed her to build close friendships and working relationships with classmates, and she was fortunate when one classmate offered her the opportunity to work with him in his own business. Another significant opportunity came where the class were asked to work on a real product campaign for a leading Irish energy company, and the students were invited to present their ideas to the company on completion. Sarah (12P) explained the importance of this:

> Sarah (12P): "They also gave us the second opportunity […] to go to their company to do another presentation, and talk them a lot of stuff in here, and face to face talk, describe what your idea, decide how its work. It's really, really great experience. Even I can't get the job opportunity, even I can't, so I still think it's great."

When asked to elaborate on the significance of the opportunity and if similar might be available in China, Sarah (12P) replied:

> Sarah (12P): "No. How is it possible? It's impossible. Like, for my area, for my field, the great company, what I want to go is Tencent, Alibaba. But they

wouldn't give you the opportunity because you just a student. You don't have any background for...no it's impossible."

Sarah (12P) was not only expressing satisfaction with the opportunity, but she also commended the role the academic staff played in arranging this unique opportunity for her. Even though her initial limitations in English came across as an impediment for her, by being given the opportunity to pursue her own objectives she expresses that she felt empowered.

Sarah's (12P) experience is by no means unique, as several students expressed similar opportunities to work in settings which gave them the opportunity to develop or grow. Another example was Niall (1P). He was afforded the chance to work with a Dublin-based museum to help curate an exhibition on Chinese art, a situation which he said was on account of his ability to read and understand both simplified and traditional Chinese. Because of the mixture of theoretical and practical elements in his master's course he felt he was being equipped to practice in a more dynamic art environment. His situation was different as he had already worked extensively in his field in China, and he was keen to utilise his work experience and new educational background to establish himself in Ireland. Like Sarah (12P), he felt empowered by his course choice and was encouraged by the opportunities it presented.

6.4.3.2 Expectations and reality for undergraduates

Undergraduate students shared different viewpoints which reflected their expectations of what their learning experience may bring for them. Damien (2U) was clear from the start about the importance of improving his English language ability, but now as a student he viewed gaining academic knowledge and learning ahead of this. For Damien (2U), English was a way for him to study in a different setting, and living and studying in Ireland could provide experiences which were absent in China. He claimed that English offers him 'freedom' to study because he is studying linguistics, and this is usually taught through translated texts in China whereas in Ireland he can read directly through English. For Damien (2U), learning linguistics through English is 'easier' and he largely found his experience enjoyable. The advantage at this stage for him was the position of the university as an

internationally minded institution with a higher profile than Chinese alternatives. Damien (2U) states that he 'might' encounter opportunities to compete and learn from elite students and professors, and while he is unsure of how these outcomes may be realised, he is excited and eager to experience them.

Mary (5U) had completed high school in the United States and had lived away from her parents for a number of years before arriving in Ireland, and before starting university she completed a one-year foundation programme. This could indicate that she had developed ways of adapting to new learning and living settings, but she felt that despite her experiences, university was very different. She explained this difference as the following:

> "Lots of self-study time, and instead of teaching you they would show you the direction and point out the goal to your direction, instead just show you this is the way you get to there. That's what I need. I don't need people to tell me like, how you need to do it or what are you going to do in your life? I just need to like, it's open my mind and widen my view of the world." (Mary 5U)

This result was not expressed as something she had expected, and because she had lived and studied in the US and in the Irish foundation programme, she did not think she would find a balance that would change her opinion. She did not specify what this description meant to her in this exchange but did elaborate that she was impressed by the mindset of students in Ireland because they were confident making personal decisions about their future. However, the pressure of having to succeed in a challenging science-based course has significant, with classroom relationships and learning material playing a part in the increased difficulty of her subject. These difficulties include the quantity and type of material to be studied on a weekly basis, and the difficulty of the first semester and exams. Her relief that she didn't fail gave her hope, confidence, and the knowhow to study more proactively.

6.4.3.3 Experiencing Ireland in a 'year abroad' setting

Julie (7U) was an undergraduate with a different background to others, as she arrived in Ireland in her final year through her Chinese university's relationship with

the host university. As distinct from other undergraduate international students, she was an experienced student but had arrived in Ireland with classmates and peers, and this provided her with both a social group and also supportive peers. She had never had a learning experience fully immersed in English, and this was an important opportunity as she expected to study in the United States. She felt she needed to have first-hand experience of studying in an English speaking environment before travelling, and was conciliatory in her descriptions of both social and classroom experiences, which were intertwined. She did not compare directly with her previous experiences in China, however her premises and expectations did influence her interpretations of her experiences and their value in the future. She was confident in her understanding of the wider significance of her study choices, and also empathic towards situations which may not have come across as ideal. An example of this related to her explanation about the one of the first times she needed to order a sandwich from a deli. Even though she knew what she wanted to order, she felt stuck and embarrassed.

> “At first, I could even not order a sandwich by myself. Even though I learned English for some many years in China, but it's really embarrassing when I enter Centra and I try to order a sandwich like all those other people do. Yeah, it's a common thing, 'I want this, this, this, and they all the names of those vegetables or meat or something, but I just know I want some lettuce or something, and I don't even know what the name of the chicken fillet, so it's really embarrassing at first.” (Julie 7U)

This experience is not conceived entirely as negative. She persevered, and even went so far as to try and learn how people spoke from YouTube videos. It was not until she had made friends with other international students who understood her and helped her that she could develop the surety to make her own order. Above all, it was the embarrassment of inability of completing a simple task which lingered.

Counter to this, the quality of the teaching and learning is highly praised, and this student is highly complementary of the quality of the teaching over her professors in China. Challenges existed for her in the types of courses she took which she felt were more difficult as they required a lot of reading, and she believed her English

was insufficient as she had never taken a similar course before. This impacted her average score, which previously was in the top 5% or 10% of the class and was now more ‘normal’. Coupled with the need to prepare for study in the United States, she was under pressure to meet a range of new objectives and did not expect to be under the pressures she found herself. As she was in a new and unfamiliar setting, completing these tasks may have been more difficult to complete, and this may have impacted her academic performance.

Her prior academic confidence had caused her to disregard the pressures she may have been experiencing, and perhaps because she was in an unusual environment she may not have been in a strong position to respond to it. She explained that because she was an exchange student, her home university stipulated the modules she must take, with two courses requiring a lot of reading and analysis. She stated that these were ‘really tough’ as she was not a ‘native speaker’ and had to invest more time and effort than she expected as they were like ‘literature courses’. She also commented on the style of teaching, where in China students would be taught as much information as possible, while in Ireland the students would be invited to think critically on situations and to find answers themselves. While admitting there were numerous advantages to this, there were problems:

> “Because I always discuss this kind of things with my friends as well, and actually we don't get a good conclusion about that, we just have to say 'yeah that is because the country is different, the culture is different’, just like that. […] but in China you ask students to do the critical thinking and they just don't have the solid foundation before so if you just ask them to do that it's really tough, and it's just unbelievable and unsuitable, I think.” (Julie 7U)

Julie (7U) made this important but clear distinction. She had already completed three years in university in China and now had to make a significant change to the way she learned and studied. She explained that the ways of assessment between both countries were different and students in Ireland were expected to be more autonomous. This was different to other undergraduates who were interviewed as they felt the teaching practices and assessment to be preferable over typical Chinese academic expectations. These differences required more work from Julie

(7U), as she had to adapt to different academic standards. It also meant she needed to focus in different areas as she had to explore the subject matter rather than respond to provided answers.

6.5 The role of the university

The university plays an important role for all students as they develop through the learning and social experiences. Students individually attach their own relevance or significance to their specific situations and objectives and there is a need to understand how the university helps in fostering realisable ambitions for international students. This analysis of the role of the university as a theme will firstly address the expectations of students, and will then explore the ways students feel their university facilitates their academic, personal and professional growth.

6.5.1 Ireland in comparison with overseas study destinations

Students actively sought to study overseas, sometimes as an individual or with the help and support of family members. There were a number of reasons for choosing Ireland, which is important to understand in relation to the policy and investment by the Irish state and the universities to create an attractive international study destination. The responses which have emerged respond to their experiences choosing to study in Ireland.

Participants of this research frequently pointed to the inefficiencies of university education in China as a driving factor for choosing to study overseas. Indeed, universities in China were considered as organisations which lacked technological and pedagogical expertise, while universities overseas were referred to as being more advanced and using the best techniques. Participants were quite vague in their explanation of what this means but there were important reasons beyond this which contributed to the students' choice to study overseas. Students had established their expectations about what the university could do for them, and this had played a part in their decision to choose an Irish university.

There were reasons which were specific to Ireland, such as Ireland's learning environment was clean or green, there were not many Chinese students, and

Ireland was an English-speaking country. Irish universities also appear to satisfy other expectations which come from commonly held beliefs among Chinese students who travel overseas, according to Niall (P1). He was studying in a humanities postgraduate course and had previously completed a master's degree in the United Kingdom and explained that he felt the majority of students who travelled did so to study for business and engineering qualifications. He said that engineering overseas is seen as more advanced, with better facilities such as labs and technology, while business students may be able to get a better job, although he described this as a 'myth'.

Declan (4U) was largely positive about the advantage of studying overseas, compared to studying in China where he had previously studied. He spoke openly about the differences of learning between his Irish university and his experiences in China, and that these differences were very attractive to him. He described some of the environmental differences, such as the pace of lifestyle and that his time in the Chinese university was quite hectic and rushed. In Ireland he was granted more flexibility to work when it was convenient to him.

6.5.2 Paying for study overseas

Deciding where to study is an important process, while the price of education is significant for people choosing to study overseas. Declan (4U) recognised that the learning differences and approaches to factors such as academic integrity were significant and would help him to produce better academic work. However, while he saw that his study overseas was of great benefit, he was clear about the cost which was over three times that which EU students paid. For Declan (4U) and other participants, the destination for study overseas had been decided on by the price of education and cost of living. Ireland was not necessarily considered less or more expensive when compared with universities in other European countries, but the necessity for a third language, such as German or Swedish, was among the factors significant for helping students to make their decision. Frequently, Irish universities were compared with universities from other English speaking countries, and reasons such as safety, environment, and price were used for comparison. When asked

about why she chose Ireland, Sandra's (8P) final decision was highly influenced by money:

> "I think, first of all, money. Because, it's really important, you have to pay for your own fees. For me, I have to pay my own fees, nobody's, except my parents, nobody is going to support me, except my parents, so I need to see how much money it will cost, and the safety. Definitely." (Sandra 8P)

Like Sandra (8P), other participants mentioned that their parents supported them and that their study would not be possible without this. One reason Sandra (8P) had originally chosen Dublin was because of its reputation as a global IT hub, but other factors were important in this process including the price of education and environment. As an English-speaking country, Ireland feels it competes directly with countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, but it fails to attract but a fraction of the quantities of fee-paying international students.

Students from China do not typically avail of any financial support beyond their own self-generated funds. Choosing the right destination to study is a delicate process where many factors must be accounted for, and these priorities can change abruptly. Despite apparent opportunities in Dublin, the uncertainty which was growing around the growing Covid-19 pandemic situation caused her to reassess her priorities. Prior to this, Sandra (8P) had even been offered work in Dublin, although she did state it was not related to her major. The Covid-19 pandemic's unprecedented impacts forced many changes, and despite the opportunities in Ireland which her degree may have offered, she had decided to postpone them in favour of returning to China and being with family.

Chinese students studying overseas reliance on family support is very significant, and it is worth gaining insight on when the discussion on price was raised. It was regularly mentioned that students relied on support from family, and while this could mean support with payment of fees and the cost of living, students also needed their parents to accept their plans prior to travel. For families to support financially, the investment is frequently justified by the opportunity to provide more than just an education which could lead to something else. Sarah (12P) elaborates on this:

> ‘Like in China, in these days they will, if they have money, they can afford things. They will consider that, buy a house, buy a car, or just get the highest education. So, if they can afford it maybe they will put money in the education […] their parents maybe think 'if I just take money for my children's education they can live the better life than me'. So that's maybe the reason in China.’ (Sarah P12)

In this case, education is presented as a means of emancipation and social progress, where parents see opportunities providing their children with an education which may not have been available when they were of that age. It was widely accepted by the participants that family believed in the necessity to study overseas, and families felt it necessary to offer a good career platform. Niall (1P), who did not divulge how he was funding his postgraduate study, had relied on his parents to support him when he initially studied in the UK. He tried to offer more background about why education was viewed so favourably by Chinese families:

> ‘I think one reason is possibly because after cultural revolution we realised for ten years, the higher education in China had been suspend, so if anyone who wants to study something quite advanced, they have to go abroad. So, gets for the first generation of those students who seek higher education overseas, that's because there's a physical obstacle there. They couldn't get higher education in China.’ (Niall U1)

Niall (1P) goes on to say that younger people are quite comfortable with western media and culture, and while the same reasons for the popularity of overseas travel may have changed, the attitude towards overseas education has become enhanced.

6.5.3 Accessing work opportunities and internships

Access to future job opportunities or internships are largely regarded as a sign that the students are getting a quicker return on their investment. Additionally, it was reported in some courses that completing an internship or work placement was acceptable as part of a student’s programme. Sometimes this could be in place of a dissertation, and this was an attractive element when students were applying to study. Work experience in Ireland would enhance the perception of their

experience when they returned to China, and those with the option were very open to it.

As students had completed a large part of their study, the challenges of finding these opportunities became pressing. There was concern that the necessary professional experiences would be unattainable. For postgraduate students this was serious cause of concern, which inculcated feelings of anxiety and inferiority because they had yet to find a suitable job or placement. Students had already looked at working and internship options, but despite some being interviewed no student had been successfully recruited. The students were greatly concerned, as they said that they would 'fail' in a task which they saw as necessary for their future.

Laura (11P) found that the interview process for some positions was quite challenging, and even after several interviews she had not managed to find an internship. While she had not clarified whether it was a requirement of her course, she did not display much optimism about the possibility of successfully securing a role. Her confidence was low because if she was unable to guarantee a job or internship it could hurt her plans, and this was problematic. She was hoping to spend quite some time in Ireland after studying, but if she was unsuccessful finding a suitable job then her plans would need to change, which was undesirable.

Postgraduate students were very conscious of the two-year work visa granted to students upon completion of their studies. A number of students made direct reference to the importance of this option when choosing to study in Ireland. However, they were not fully prepared for the competition in seeking internships or satisfactory post-study working options, and the lack of certainty surrounding opportunities made it more difficult for them. The internship is an important aspect of the course, but because they are students from China they were unfamiliar with how to enter a job market in a foreign country. These pressures felt greater due to the relevance of the internship to the outcomes of their respective study programmes.

Joanne (6P) explained that there were a number of issues which stemmed from this. As part of her programme, she could choose to write a master's dissertation or

complete an internship as her final assessment. There were a range of barriers in place which impacted her confidence in successfully attaining a position. The barriers she raised were language, as she felt she would be passed over, a lack of support from her department, and some opportunities were not accessible due to visa restrictions. Communicating in another language could cause anxiety and it must be considered as a potential impediment for second-language users seeking opportunities. This is highly relevant when in an unfamiliar setting, such as a jobs market. Describing the support offered to students who wished to seek internships:

> "[…] you do not get enough support or information for the internship. Because as the programme describes, if you want to internship you just go and get one. But from my experience, it's kinda hard. Even they send us information what the position is just not enough for all the students." (Joanne 6P)

It is important to note that she says 'for all students', which suggests that it is not only difficult for her. The student had explained that she spoke with others and there was a mutual feeling. She said that there was little guidance given about how to successfully be recruited, which was frustrating. Joanne (6P) elaborated on the complications and explained that she and her friends even struggled to get replies from applications they made.

The issue regarding visa restrictions is important to note, as even though postgraduate students are granted a two-year work visa upon completion of the programme, this is often insufficient. Joanne (6P) made the point that numerous internships were inaccessible as they required a longer period of legal residency than their visa allowed, or only EU or EEEA citizens may apply. She said there is 'not even a chance for us'. Joanne (6P) was not alone in reflecting on the challenges that she faced, and while some students did not express the same level of frustration, the same issues were present.

6.5.4 Reputation of the university

The university chosen by students fulfils a range of purposes. It is not only where students study and learn, but it carries a reputation overseas which holds important

value and the experiences from study should be of benefit in the future. There was a wide range of distinct and personal reasons for choosing individual study programmes, but it seems that the reputation of the university in China was not a priority. Students were content that the university would be unknown, and they sought other ways of ensuring their educational experiences carried value. Irrespective of this, undergraduates and postgraduates were proud that they were students in their university.

They recognised that the language of instruction was important, and some paid attention to the status of their university within global university ranking systems. There was awareness of the relevance of university ranking systems to employers because of the number of universities worldwide, and rankings could help employers to decide on the quality or reputation of a university from a job applicant. Students interviewed viewed the availability of internships and post-study working opportunities as superior to these kinds of assessment tools as future employers would look on work experience overseas more favourably than the assessed quality of the Irish universities.

6.6 Social networks

Social networks are an important feature of students of all ages and backgrounds and their experience in higher education. For international students, social networks have important functions, and they include previously established relationships such as friends, family, or peers, who may be in their home country or in some cases they have also travelled to the host country. Students develop and maintain a range of networks both in the host institution and with people from outside, and these networks can be made up of co-national students, other nationalities, and also people from the host country. It is because of this fluidity in the formation and development of social networks that each individual's relationships avoid classification. Examples presented should be seen as ways of recognising the diversity in how networks operate for international students.

6.6.1 New students and new relationships - Undergraduate social networks

Within the cohort of undergraduate students who interviewed for this research there was very little in common between the students, which allows for an interesting narrative highlighting the diversity present. This is especially the case given the students came from one country.

Undergraduate students were all studying in Irish universities for the first time, and all but one was in the first year in university. While some had lived and studied in Ireland and elsewhere prior to arriving, many experienced living and studying overseas for the first time and this meant that they did not have strong connections to the host country.

David (3U) had only visited Ireland once with his mother and had no tangible links with Ireland prior to arriving to study. Despite this he appeared to have few concerns with his class relationships:

> "So, I mean for our undergraduate student I think it's, it's not bad because different groups has interact, we have connect, just like I have Irish friend, I have American friends, I friend from other European countries. But I have set of different people from different countries, they hang out or often play with other guys from their own countries." (David 3U)

David (3U) describes a rather amicable environment where he does not appear challenged or concerned with the networks he is close to. He accepts the interactions and sees little which could be necessarily negative, at least in classroom settings. It was apparent that students in some courses had built more diverse social networks than others. There was no indicator as to the reason for this from those who had experienced it.

Julie (7U) explained in detail her experiences trying to build close relationships with Irish students in her programme of study. While she explained that there were not any issues with building friendships with students from other countries, it was very difficult to make friends with students from Ireland. She said she could understand this, but it was something she really wanted and she found the Irish

students seemed unwilling to reciprocate. She associated this with local students having their own personal circle or network. She expressed dismay that ‘maybe they don’t want to make friends with us’ and that those friends she had made were because they worked together on projects. She reflected that:

> “they don’t automatically want to make friends with you or that someone told them you have to maybe establish a friendship with somebody. So actually, for me this is a side thing, because we try to make friends with them.” (Julie 7U)

Even though Julie (7U) states that she can accept that students behave this way, this examination shows what students perceive when they evaluate the relationships they have formed. In this case, the student spoke of a friendship she made by being put into a group to complete an assignment in a class. She held a desire to make friends but found that the willingness was not reciprocated. It is worth noting that Julie (7U) says that her fellow international students from other EU countries felt similarly. She thought the onus to facilitate this is her university’s responsibility, as they do not offer opportunities to students to create meaningful relationships where friends have a deeper understanding of each other. There is no suggestion by Julie (7U) that communication is entirely absent, and she points to the quality of the communication. She equates this higher quality communication with holding conversations where participants share details about each other, such as their interests, hobbies, and even future goals. However, she feels this level of conversation is absent and that Irish students did not really want to involve her in similar conversations. She says:

> “[it] seems that here people don't want to share these things with you and you are not a big deal to their life, you are not an influence of their life so they just don't want to share this information. They don't want to really be friends with you. I think people just try to be polite but actually they are not treat you as a friend.” (Julie 7U)

Julie (7U) shares experiences that could reflect negatively on her experiences studying in Ireland, and even though they may not determine the quality of her degree, she is left with some questions. Because of this, she queried the value of

living and studying in university overseas when opportunities for immersive experiences were limited because of less chances for genuine interactions with 'local' students.

6.6.1.1 Developing student identities – undergraduate experiences

For undergraduates, building social networks relies on a number of aspects. While both Julie (7U) and Declan (4U) refer to relationships which were determined by their classroom dynamic, Damien (2U) arrived in Ireland prepared to study in the humanities in Dublin and explained that from the point of arrival he was very comfortable with living and studying in Ireland. An aspect of this came from his Catholic faith which he says allowed him an avenue to foster relationships beyond the classroom and to establish a meaningful connection with Ireland. He initially was enthused by the opportunity to study in Ireland because of its Christian heritage, and he spoke with confidence about his Catholic faith and the freedom he could experience practicing it in Dublin. Through the Catholic community in the university he saw that he could make 'true friends'. For example, he had the opportunity to work as a volunteer with Catholic homeless charities. This provided Damien (2U) the chance to not only build relationships which matter beyond the classroom, but also to gain a spiritual connection. Through his study and volunteering, Damien (2U) felt he had developed the view that he was becoming more cosmopolitan with a 'wider horizon to my see myself as someone in the vast stage of the world'. He felt that his experiences with others had offered him a new world view:

> "So, everyone is basically the same. There are cultural differences, but as far as I know the cultural differences are superficial. People look different, people speak different languages, people eat different food, they have different characters. But those differences are superficial." (Damien 2U)

The student felt that he saw beyond how people presented themselves. He looked to people's character before drawing conclusions, and was unperturbed by the physical differences, both of living in a new city but also of meeting new people.

This outlook shows that Damien (2U) was diverging from a previously conceived opinion where he now sees the greater similarities between people. He explained that he could not have reached this opinion had he been in China, although he sees his new outlook as a result of the people he met while studying and volunteering in Dublin.

These interactions allowed him to gain a greater sense of self as a Chinese person and a Catholic. He shared an interesting story where he was playing pool with a female student. While the female student was on the phone, she said she would like to marry another female someday, to which Damien (2U) was a little shocked as it was his first time experiencing a conversation like this. The female student asked, 'Is China homophobic?' Damien (2U) did not provide his response to this question, but he did delve into what he comprehended of his Chinese identity. To him, he felt westerners perceived that 'Chinese people are like a big army marching in the same step, marching in the same line' conveying an image of 'super-unified community'. However, he rejected this, primarily as he was a Catholic which holds political connotations in China, but also as he felt his faith placed him beyond that perceived community and into one which is more universal. Damien (2U) tried to reject the stereotype which he had been associated with, but it appears that to approach that rejection he needed to face up to his own assumptions about how relationships can and are formed. The interaction was initiated over a game of pool, which is a straightforward and common way of socialising. Perhaps both parties felt comfortable enough to present themselves as who they were, but in doing so Damien (2U) presented an understanding of who he was beyond the stereotype he felt had already been assigned to him.

Based on the woman's response detailed above, Damien (2U) believed that students from China were stereotyped, which was an issue that he felt he needed to raise. There was no suggestion that both Damien (2U) and the woman were friends, or they had been previously acquainted. We learn only that Damien (2U) has benefitted from this exchange by learning more about his identity as a Chinese Catholic, which is something personal but cannot be perceived by others based on relationships formed during pool games. Damien (2U) felt he had already fostered

'true' friendships through his volunteering work, and when he found himself interacting with a person who did not know him in a way which he felt represented his real character, he was presented with an alternative view which he may have ignored or he had yet to encounter before interacting with a person.

6.6.1.2 Social groups and student interactions

The examination presented here has detailed some of the experiences of undergraduates and focused on some issues which were raised. Undergraduates communicated more comfort in their settings and presented the impression that they were positioned better to build relationships, although this did not come without its challenges. Cultural differences were seen as an impediment but only because some students were unsure or unfamiliar with what people were talking about. Declan (4U) explained that sometimes he was unable to follow what people were laughing about or he felt lost in conversations and could not understand or follow the speakers. However, as he was planning to spend four years in university, he did not convey much concern at that time.

Mary (5U) also shared a similar feeling from the perspective of an undergraduate student, but in a life sciences course of study. Despite classes consisting of many nationalities and backgrounds as well as many Irish students, she said she felt comfortable getting to know people because people moved around a lot and the class sizes are quite small. To her, the new situation was more comfortable, and she was able to meet who she liked as she felt free to socialise with different people or groups if she felt like it. She did make the point that people were not exactly welcoming or friendly, but she was fortunate that she met some nice people. As mentioned previously, Mary (5U) has had significant experience studying overseas and she completed high school in the United States and a year-long foundation programme before starting in her university. When talking about building relationships and networks, she referenced her prior experiences and compared them, indicating that she drew on these past instances where she had to make friends in unfamiliar settings. Other undergraduate students who participated showed less resolve, although largely they seem to have coped well with building diverse but resilient social networks.

Building social networks relies on students participating in new and different social situations. As international students are usually new to their environment, and social situations can provide some awkward moments as differences between cultures can affect the way students socialise. Students largely and expectedly find food and ways of socialising, such as when drinking alcohol, to be unfamiliar and in some cases hard to assimilate to. The amount of alcohol consumed was irrelevant but the ways that people socialise when drinking was referred to. David (3U) made one comparison between Chinese and Irish students relating to alcohol, and explained that while he went to the pub, he did not like it. He preferred to spend time drinking and playing games or being more active. For him, this was not an attractive way of socialising with alcohol. This can be coupled with the criticism shared on the food and dining options in Ireland, which were considered unsatisfactory, especially as food is given a high cultural status in China. Students accepted that Irish food was different, but their reality was that they had to find ways of buying or cooking food they found comfortable or tasty, and frequently the options available were not satisfactory.

6.6.2 Finding meaning in relationships - Postgraduate social networks

As explained previously, the importance of the overall experience of studying in Ireland was expressed as holding greater importance for postgraduate students. Within this, the students have placed a high priority on the quality of friendships and relationships they develop while studying. It does not seem to be necessarily focused on long-term friendships, but on relationships which allow students to have more meaningful experiences in Ireland.

The importance of social networks for postgraduate students and how they are formed and utilised are quite different from undergraduates. Indeed, postgraduates conveyed the need to rely on these networks and relationships more than undergraduates. Also, different postgraduates from some subjects have quite different experiences to others, which in some cases is quite starkly reflected. Some postgraduate participants in this research appeared to be one of the only Chinese students in their class, which has had mixed results on the student. While

they engaged in a range of activities to build closer networks, some found that building friendships was challenging in some cases.

6.6.2.1 Creative responses to building connections

Students attempted different ways of building relationships with classmates. One of these was participating in university societies, which are typically organised by students. Ray (10P) joined a foreign languages society to try to get to know more people, and in doing so he found a novel means of using food as a way of fostering his social networks. Initially he voiced concern about the need to cook every day because he 'can't eat like chips, burger every day' and there was a lack of variety of suitable produce available to buy. Through the contacts he made at society meetings he was able to use food and cooking to build connections:

> Ray (10P): But cooking also helps me make many friends. I share all with my friends, my flatmates. I meet some people in society […] some people we are very, first we talk about much then I can invite them to my apartment and cook together.

The apparent simplicity of Ray's (10P) solution to both dealing with Irish food, building relationships and making friends is worth noting. While it is unclear who initiated the shared cooking and eating experience, Ray's (10P) willingness to share his own culture and learn of others is indicative of the resolve he developed through his enthusiasm to benefit from his overseas learning experience. It is a good example of how students can respond to specific challenges, and when food and food culture are viewed with great importance this resonates as a strong example of students responding to their surroundings and circumstances. Accessibility to these types of group meetings can mean a lot for a student. They do not appear to be common occurrences based on the responses in interviews, and they were not organised by the host university. Ray (10P) was ultimately quite positive about his academic and social experiences, and as stated he was very enthusiastic to improve his language skill, and gain practical experiences which helped him improve personally and professionally.

Fellow postgraduate students were equally mindful of the need to improve professional skills, but they were also aware of the broader benefits of overseas

study. While the postgraduate qualification carried value for future job searching, students were conscious that their learning experience extended beyond their final award. Forming lasting social networks appears to have carried great significance and value which was pertinent to their expectations.

6.6.2.2 Building close relationships within class groups

Through Sarah's (12P) courses she benefitted greatly from the variety of opportunities to work with different classmates. While she was regretful that there was no other Chinese student in her class to share or consult on the numerous lectures, she was equally grateful for the opportunities to work closely with classmates and to make friends. This process meant that she was able to build close networks and establish friendships with some of her classmates. She felt that the group work which constituted the assessment helped her focus on her skills. In some cases, the individuals asked her to join their groups because they wanted to add an international or cross-cultural element to their project and valued the contribution she could bring to the group, which seems to have empowered her and given her confidence, especially as the course had appeared to be very difficult from the outset.

She was fully supportive of the concept of group work and observed that if people have a positive experience the first time then they are likely to continue working together, as was the case with one person who she now referred to as her friend. However, in another situation she had a very negative experience which she discussed. In this situation, Sarah (12P) was in a group with two male students. One was an older part-time student and an engineer, who she found hard to speak with. Because both students were male she felt that they had a stronger connection together, and there is a suggestion they did not respect her because she was an international female student. She struggled to change their ideas despite her insisting, and in the end, she was left to follow the direction set by the other group members. She felt strongly that she knew more about visual aspects, and she grew increasingly frustrated when they refused to take her advice on board for designing a PowerPoint presentation. She was aware this would negatively affect her result for the module:

> “So I get a lowest marks on this course. So, I hate them. I wouldn't ... I even I go to my classroom I wouldn't chose to sit beside them.” (Sarah 12P)

Her final reflection on this experience and the language she used give an understanding of how serious it was to her. Not only did she get the lowest grades for this task, the process by which it happened conflicted with her previous experiences and she was left to reflect negatively on the outcome. Where previously she described her influence in groups as being collaborative and supportive, in this instance she felt ignored and that her contributions were not given the level of respect she believed they deserved.

Even with her classmates who offered support and valued her experience and contributions, she felt somewhat alone in class as the only Chinese student:

> “I really wish I can have Chinese friend in my class, you know. I really wish, because sometimes I just totally lost in the class. Even I ask what the ... no one can explain to me, even they explain to me, hard to understand. Really hard like.” (Sarah 12P)

Sarah (12P) still viewed her English as an impediment to both learning and building closer relationships with other students, both in socialising where classmates might usually go to a bar, or during class. While some people tried to speak more slowly, others were less supportive and would not try to help. Her confidence in this area was low and she relied on the good nature of the people she spoke with so that she could gain from the conversations and build relationships. From an academic perspective, she also had to account for her limitations in this area and reduce the scope of her projects, and it appeared that there was no support available from the university to make sure she could improve or develop her English effectively. Sarah (12P) had a firm understanding of her abilities and limitations, and this allowed her to work effectively by focusing on her strengths, but because of this it appears that not enough was done to facilitate her development beyond this. She describes a situation where in familiar areas she can thrive when supported by classmates and friends, while in other situations she feels that she is only surviving.

6.6.2.3 Proactive support for students

Students can feel better equipped to engage in social settings and university life if they are prepared and have an effective way of learning in their new surroundings. Sandra (8P) explained that she was given a 'buddy' to help her when she was confused or struggled to understand things. The system was set up by her university and she was partnered with a former student who was a person she described as older and having more experience. Sandra (8P) found that this was quite helpful and supportive as she could ask about simple things which helped her settle in quicker, and she felt she had fewer embarrassing situations. While she made no reference to helping with social situations, being able to go through her day without making simple errors that cost time or were embarrassing gave her the confidence to focus on other aspects of living and studying.

The buddy system can be seen as a way of mentoring, and while she initially benefitted from learning about straight forward day-to-day differences, like using the 'stop' button on the bus, she soon relied on her buddy for advice based on his life experiences. While this buddy system was helpful for Sandra (8P), it was only available through her school or department and other students in this university may not have had this available. Sandra (8P) was quite confident and positive and was quick to mention the supports which were available, and that might indicate that not only was she aware of services but she also availed of their expertise, including the International Student Society. Her willingness to engage here may point to her own sense of vulnerability on arrival, but it seems that through the buddy system and society she was able to rely on supportive networks which allowed her to focus on her study and give her the chance to grow as a person.

6.6.2.4 Student expectations, demands, and workloads

Joanne's (6P) experience of building social networks does not reflect Sandra's (8P) positive mentoring experience, as she and other postgraduate students experienced things differently. Her department offered no support towards international students, such as the 'buddy system' available for Sandra (8P), and in many cases it was very difficult to build close relationships with Irish students. Joanne (6P) knew that culture shock would be a factor when studying overseas and she knew she

would encounter different values to those she was familiar with in China. She said that mostly people were very friendly and polite, but that in her class she had found it challenging to get to know her classmates well. Because she felt there were different values and cultures interacting she was happy to accept differences, but she knew from a friend who studied elsewhere that regular events were organized within class groups. Joanne (6P) wanted to say that it was because the students had little spare time and that the class was quite big, especially compared with her friends', but it did not feel like this was a fair assessment:

> "I'm not sure if that is the culture stuff, or just because of the time. I think the problem is that we just need more time or more opportunities to talk to each other. To get familiar with, of course there going to culture different stuff […] because, we grew up in different cultures and the stories I'm familiar with, I want to share with you, probably I may need to go back to the very original version and then later come to, ok why I kind of find it is really interesting. Or OK this music you're familiar with but probably I'm not familiar with. So, you need to do the bit explanation for this part, so it's kind of like hard to really to find the, is it called like functionally?" (Joanne 6P)

In this situation, Joanne (6P) tries to explain the awkwardness which sharing her background and learning from others can cause, and that ultimately it requires time. She seems put off by this and wonders about the purpose or reasons for engaging in these conversations. As she doesn't find enough time or opportunity to talk with fellow students, she is missing out on the possibility of developing deeper conversations which she sees as necessary. To her, it is a problem that is increasingly impactful on her learning experiences.

Significantly, Joanne (6P) felt that because these opportunities seemed inaccessible and that her university or school failed to facilitate chances for interactions or friendships, she feels overburdened by coursework and assignments.

> "What I expect from a master degree is that you are not only trying to get this degree or certificate. Like, if you decide to go abroad, you're going to experience the things here, say the culture stuff, the university stuff, and also, I don' t know, working stuff. I don't know, it's all about living here, but

now I kind of feel like because the loads of assignments and stuff, so basically either university lectures or home assignments." (Joanne 6P)

In this case, she refers to what her overall educational expectations were, and these extended beyond the classroom learning experience to encompass a range of learning experiences, including cultural interactions. However, due to the number of classes and respective assignments, her time is devoted to concentrating on her studies and she has little opportunity to build relationships which enhance her overall lived experience. On the contrary, she finds that she may be losing out.

6.7 Career benefits

Without exception, all participants in the research were keen to use their studying in Ireland as an opportunity to improve their career outlook. Students from China who choose to study overseas do so with the knowledge that it will come at significant financial cost. Students and their parents see the expected return as a worthy investment towards the individual's future. In the majority of cases it is regarded primarily as the student's career or employment after university. The broader benefits of university study and living overseas are highly regarded and seen as an incentive, but the objective in the majority of cases is to build a robust platform to start their working life. Ireland was chosen for a range of reasons, and career benefit was closely linked to it. Responses in this theme considered that future career objectives were highly important but saw the role of university education from many perspectives.

This theme encroaches on all aspects of the student experience throughout this research, and it is given a high priority both by students and in Irish policy on internationalisation. In this case, it is necessary to evaluate students' perceptions of their learning experience and how it can equate to present or future career benefits. Students who study overseas do so not just to get a better job, but to find one which rewards them for their endeavour. What is significant in this theme is that under-graduates and postgraduates hold shared career objectives and seemingly possess similar expectations from their educational direction.

The findings presented under this theme shall explore the students' appreciation of their course's applicability to their career objectives and the quality of the opportunities which may be attainable. The challenge for students at this point is trying to recognise the ways in which their programme may benefit their career when they are at a stage which lacks certainty. Undergraduate students will have only commenced their degree courses and will still be familiarising themselves with higher education structures and processes, while postgraduate students were at a challenging halfway point in the one-year degrees. For undergraduate students choosing to study in Ireland was based on Ireland's access to leading industry in their area, such as biomedical science and information technology. At the early stage of their degree it was an element which was yet to become a concern and was seen as an obstacle to be cleared at a later date. Postgraduate students felt quite pressured by the necessity to find working opportunities either as part of their degree programme, or for after completion of their degree.

6.7.1 Professional opportunities for undergraduates

The importance of gaining practical work-related experiences which benefited students came as a priority for both undergraduates and postgraduates. While this was less of an urgent requirement for undergraduates, it was an important aspect and which had influenced their decision to study in Ireland. Mary (5U) clarifies this:

> "Biomed in Ireland is pretty special, and I heard, it's quite top of the world because so many pharmaceutical or biotechnology company around here, so it's a really good opportunity and know about this company. And if I can get internship there, that would be great." (Mary 5U)

Students at undergraduate level prove to be quite aware of their choices and how they are relevant within the global economy. In this case, Ireland's reputation as a host to many multinationals offers its education sector distinct advantages. As there are only a small number of universities it is possible that the number of students seeking work and internship opportunities with requisite qualifications could be quite low, in comparison with countries with larger populations. Famous corporations act as an attractive prospect for students who are conscious of the competitive job market in their home country.

6.7.1.1 Awareness of their future career direction

Students showed a high level of awareness of what they required for their future working lives, and while undergraduate students did not feel the same level of urgency, they were conscious of the opportunities which could make them a competitive undergraduate. David (3U) shared a similar position to Mary (5U) when he sought to begin studying computer science, and the presence of major IT companies was an integral element in his decision to study in Ireland. In fact, David (3U) stated that he had already found some part-time work with an IT multinational in Dublin, which he seemed quite pleased by. While this proved enticing he was regretful that the time commitment required for work and his college study interfered with each other, but he was encouraged by the chances available. David (3U)'s aspirations were quite different as he sought a career and life in IT outside of China because he said Chinese technology and internet related companies had a reputation for placing excessive expectations on employees. He was conscious that undergraduate students were only granted a one-year visa after graduation, unlike the two years offered to postgraduates, but he did not appear overly concerned.

Undergraduates were also aware that their learning should not entirely be focused on a future career. They had established learning expectations which were important to their understanding of the university experience. For these students, being in university and learning a subject to an advanced level was of value to them. In the case of Damien (2U), he was attentive to the importance of his learning towards a future career but saw the academic experience as his priority for his foreseeable future. In this case, he was enthusiastic about his studies and spoke extensively about the subjects and contexts he learned in. He said he was already a confident speaker of German and was hopeful to improve his skills in this area, in addition to improving his English. However, his priority above all was to gain extended knowledge in linguistics as he knew that learning in Ireland offered him distinct advantages over learning in China. However, as with other participants, his positive expectations for the future were aspirational and he was not in a position to realistically offer much insight on his future. While he did not find the learning difficult, he seemed confident about where his study would take him, but he could not look to any assurances given based on his study to that point.

These kinds of assurances or guidance could help undergraduate students to build a better understanding of their progression through university, although it appears that the only mechanism for this is to offer testing or assessment. Damien (2U) did not refer to exams, however fellow undergraduates felt that their assessment and exam results provided some indication of their learning to that point, although Mary's (5U) feeling of relief that she had passed the first semester offers a sense that students felt they faced academic challenges which could derail their objectives or aspirations, which may impact their outlooks.

6.7.1.2 Recognising university as a transition point

Undergraduates presented their own versions of their individualised career plans with respect to their goals. University at the early stage of undergraduate study was seen as an important transition point between formal education and professional life. Students were conscious of their potential career choices but they were content to continue learning in their chosen programme without feeling the need to follow alternative trajectories. They recognised that the transition towards their chosen career would take time and they lacked the urgency of postgraduate students.

Julie (7U) was the exception, and while she was an undergraduate she was also in her final year of study having completed the previous three years in the Irish university's partner institution in China. As mentioned previously, her position was that she was planning to continue studying towards a postgraduate degree in the United States. When questioned on the importance of study overseas, Julie (7U) said that foreign university study was a chance to sidestep a highly competitive system of higher education and to give advantages when choosing a career. For some, study overseas gives a chance to compete with students who attended leading Chinese universities whose status implies a level of competence, and a failure to graduate from a leading university means you could miss the opportunity to find work in a leading company in China.

Julie (7U) saw overseas study as an important step for her in her overall growth as an individual, but many of the employment challenges shared by postgraduate

students were . Study overseas was a chance for her to display independence, but also to show that she was brave:

> "[..] you know you cannot always live in the comfortable zone. You need to step out of that zone and try to find some new things and you need to experience more things in the world. I just don't want to block myself only in a circle that is I live there for 20 years already. I want something new, so I just want to be brave." (Julie 7U)

Julie (7U) views her study overseas as a continued exercise in establishing her limitations, and she wants to try to prove to herself that she can achieve what she sets out to. She prioritises this sense of self-fulfilment over educational or career objectives. For her study overseas is an opportunity to benefit widely from the experience of living and being a student overseas which can give her the belief that she has the potential to be independent. She does not see that her career, in the typical sense of finding a reliable or rewarding job, is the first priority, but considers her undergraduate and future postgraduate study as steps in a process of personal development and lifelong learning. Despite encountering challenges in her learning experiences, the conditions which helped her gain independence offered her the opportunity to become more confident in her day-to-day life as a student.

Undergraduate students present a range of alternative outlooks on their careers or futures based on the interview data collected. While only a small portion was explored directly as part of this theme, career objectives transcend across the students' lives and impact their decisions and direction in many ways. Each undergraduate considers the importance of their study in a way that is relevant to them but with individual distinct and varied objectives. The data does not suggest that undergraduates are more or less career focused when deciding about their study choices, but it does show that undergraduates prioritise differently in comparison to postgraduate students.

6.7.2 Career and life focused choices of postgraduate students

The students who chose to study in Ireland at postgraduate level can be divided in two categories based on the previous work and study experiences. One smaller

cohort had gained working experience and had chosen postgraduate study as a worthwhile exercise for career progression or personal development. A larger group made up of those who had recently graduated from undergraduate studies and felt that postgraduate study was a necessity to obtain satisfactory employment in a highly competitive work setting. For both groups, Ireland was seen as a viable destination for helping to advance each individual's career, but with quite different results.

6.7.2.1 Establishing a career and life path

When explaining the university's role in offering postgraduate students' opportunities for work or source internships, interviewees revealed that their career or job was an important status. Postgraduate qualifications obtained overseas were presented as incredibly important for attaining a good job. Where possible, this qualification should be from an English-speaking country, and many participants expressed that this criterion was as important as the postgraduate qualification. However, while opportunities to gain professional work experience were seen as important, students who interviewed felt that in some cases these would not be as important because their objectives did not completely relate to this model.

Niamh (9P) described an amicable experience in Ireland and focused her attention on her learning and motivations for study overseas during her interview. She was conscious that a good job was necessary to live a comfortable life and pursue her spiritual goals. Her educational aim was not respected fully by her family who felt she would be better off finding work, which was a cause of friction. It is worth noting that her family did help her financially, however they were less satisfied with her direction. Niamh (9P) had used her time in Ireland to explore alternative social, political and spiritual viewpoints to those prevalent or accessible in China and had found comfort in the freedom to discuss these issues openly with classmates.

Placing great value on the learning outside the classroom is an important theme for all postgraduates. This can be seen by interviewees references to their interactions

with classmates and non-academic experiences. Niamh (9P) is a student who recognises these exchanges and experiences as highly valuable and rarely mentions the formal learning settings of university, as she places great value on her freedom to express herself on issues which she sees as important. From a spiritual perspective, she has taken solace in Buddhist philosophy which she feels equips her to project a lifestyle that respects her values and her outlooks.

the interviewee reflects that her ambitions will be determined by her ability to meet certain living conditions or standards, and these are determined largely by her earning potential. China, to her, is not suitable for her future and she sees her postgraduate qualification as a means of gaining longer or more established residency in Ireland beyond the term of her student visa. Even with her expectations or ideals about the most desirable way to live, she cannot achieve this without completing her master's degree and continuing to work while living in Ireland afterwards. She is quite unaware of challenges which may impact her, and it appears that she has not considered some of the problems other students were conscious of, including the search rewarding and relevant work in Ireland.

While studying, Niamh (9P) was made to feel comfortable by her supervisor who understood that circumstances can be very difficult. She explained that while she had been diagnosed with a mild depression in China, awareness of mental health issues in Ireland was helpful. Similar to other participants who found elements of Irish higher education conflicting with Chinese standards or procedures, Niamh (9P) felt encouraged and welcome in her department which allowed her time to build relationships with classmates and to engage with her learning materials, improve her language skills, and gain confidence. While her decision was initially driven by negative experiences regarding her ability to express herself openly and her family's expectations following graduation, the educational experience of studying in Ireland was been formative.

The conditions behind Niamh's (9P) decision to study overseas appear to have created what she describes as her 'immigration veil'. She pointed to her political views that policies in China were moving people culturally and politically backward.

This viewpoint is prominent and has influenced her decision sufficiently to warrant moving country.

Despite her indication that a well-paid job was necessary to secure her lifestyle, Niamh (9P) presents herself as an individual who sees her lifestyle being defined by other factors which are exclusive of her employment. She mentions freedom of expression, human rights, and attitudes to mental health as being of more significance to her. She sees living in a society where these aspects are more pronounced as a requirement. She is encouraged not only by these social aspects, but by a welcoming and supportive student body and faculty.

6.7.2.2 Blending life and study experiences

Niall (1P) was attending his master's course for largely different reasons to other participants who spoke during this study. He had already earned significant career experience working in finance and museums in China. He was confident and assertive about this and considered himself to be knowledgeable in his field, although in the area he was studying he was satisfied that the qualification would equip him in an area he felt he was lacking. Despite this, professionally he felt confident and was involved with organising cultural events in Ireland which were directly connected with his area of specialisation. Niall's (1P) knowledge and experience mean his requirements for career benefits leading from his studies were expressly different from other students who participated:

> "it was really hard to just give up your own job and position because I've been working for quite long, and before I resigned in Shanghai, a senior curator for a state owned art museum, so I got quite a good position and I won't say I'm a star, but I did have quite a lot of opportunity to be interviewed, to be invited to a radio talk in Shanghai and on TV. My life there was not bad. It was pretty good actually […] because it's a state-owned art museum, so I got chance to work with like the top Chinese artists back then. I found it a little bit hard to say I can just give up that kind of lifestyle once and for all, and return back to that status as a student" (Niall 1P)

Prioritising his relationship with his partner was a key driver for Niall's (1P) decision to move to Ireland and to begin his life there. As he explained, his life was certainly

busy and exciting, and he attached amounts of prestige and pride to his status in China. However, he had to look beyond this and consider his future with his partner, and part of this required both moving to Ireland. His decision to study was taken as an alternative to seeking work, whereby he felt that a master's degree might offer a wider scope for future opportunities in Ireland, and especially opportunities which may carry greater significance to him.

As a student, Niall (1P) had already gathered significant work experience and had pursued opportunities which his experience in China gave him the skills to execute. He explained that the course he chose would prepare him in a professional area he lacked expertise, but his own practical experiences and knowledge when equipped with the Irish university qualification were likely to benefit him. He saw that his unique expertise was absent in Ireland and saw opportunity there. His professional and academic confidence allows him to visualise possibilities in Ireland which other students may never encounter:

> "I think I want to use my experience because my experience working at the culture sector and my experience of understanding Chinese culture and how Chinese government works. Because the art museum I used to work is under the direct control of the department of propaganda of the Chinese government. So, in a sense in the past three years I've spent a lot of time deal with the Chinese government so I do know what is that approach, what are the minefields you have to step on if you have to deal with Chinese government" (Niall 1P)

This student recognises that there is great value to the experience and knowledge he holds, and recognises situations where this could be applied in Ireland. He feels from experiences in Ireland opportunities exist to provide a service which lends to closer cultural communication between both countries. Niall (1P) points specifically at the way important people or dignitaries are received in China, which he calls reception, and suggests that intercultural communication possesses obstacles, but these can be overcome with appropriate knowledge. While he sees himself as possessing this knowledge, he also offers his knowhow on government administrative practices specifically in the cultural sector. He also points to

misunderstandings of Chinese culture in the businesses which try to market or sell with a Chinese theme, which also is communicated inaccurately. Because of his particular and heightened cultural awareness due to his academic but also professional knowledge and experience, he sees that he can achieve more in educating or providing support to those seeking to work with Chinese parties in cultural events and activities.

Niall's (1P) ultimate objective is to pursue a PhD in Art History with a focus on Chinese art, but he did not rush to express this. He sees teaching about Chinese culture through art as a way of educating about China, as he saw that much of the study and research carried out across Europe concentrated on political and economic understanding of China, which conflicted with his deeper feelings. He did not elaborate on the destination for study, or the timeframe for when he may begin a doctorate which would allow him to fulfil his ambition. Given that he decided to study in Ireland because his partner had secured an attractive job in Dublin, and the reputation, amenities, or quality of higher education were largely unknown before coming, it is difficult to place a graduate of Niall's (1P) calibre. He had an established reputation in his career field, and he had already studied to a high level in the UK, while his decision to study in Ireland was largely a practical choice over other traditional pathways. For him, it seems that his experiences studying allowed him to visualise his future more clearly as he sought to understand the direction he wished to take. He may have felt similarly on the need for greater cross-cultural awareness prior to studying, but he gives a strong impression that these ideas and opinions were developed as he continued his studies. Indeed, his dissertation, which analysed forgeries in Chinese art in western museums would be a strong indicator that he had advanced to the stage where he was already focusing on researching the lack of understanding of Chinese art in European countries with rigour.

Niall (1P) showed that his academic learning and discovery were important tools for his own progression as a student from master's level to his desired doctoral level. Throughout his journey, he saw himself as a scholar researching in the university, which can be seen as an important distinction. He noted that as a Chinese scholar, he could not access European or Irish research funding to complete his studies or

attend overseas academic conferences, for example. As we now understand that his motivations stretched beyond his master's degree towards a PhD, the student was made to feel excluded by stipulations which limited his ability to connect him with viable research opportunities in Ireland.

6.8 Conclusion of findings

The interviews recorded and presented here have elaborated across the range of themes experienced by undergraduate students in the Irish higher education sector. This analysis has elaborated and provided extensive details of students' lived experiences and their outlooks on studying in Ireland. It is important that each participant has been positioned to explain their unique experiences in Ireland. An aspect which is to be reiterated is that the purpose of these interviews is to show that students have a variety of needs and expectations, and in many situations the university they study in does not accommodate them. There is an expectation that students must respond or adapt beyond their capabilities to be able to pursue their education.

Students express that they are highly motivated to achieve their academic goals, but in a range of situations feel hamstrung by some of the limitations they face. The examples presented show that students respond and react to different situations in different ways and that institutions offer responses or support in appropriate ways, or they do very little at all. There is no coherent policy or procedure for the management of students from China, and while these students do not seek preferential treatment, methods for assisting students to adapt or be accommodated lack coherence and impact. This results in a largely diverse experience for students.

Chapter 7

Analysis of *findings and discussion*

7.1 Introduction to analysis and discussion

As students strove to meet their expectations which had been established prior to arrival in Ireland, there were notable opportunities and obstacles. Their expectations varied between possessing specific targets or goals, to vague yet hopeful aspirations for the future. Ireland was an attractive destination to study in, and the students' key expectation was that they would obtain an alternative learning experience to elsewhere, either in China or other countries. Their experiences detailed here represent how they interacted with these aspirations. It is noted that those who described more positive experiences maintained their initial outlooks because their goals and ambitions could be seen as realisable, and their expectations appeared to be satisfied. If expectations were not visible or realisable, be it immediately or in the longer term, the students' desire to accomplish their goals was limited or diminished and therefore their outlooks appear to have been impacted negatively.

7.2 International student agency as a defining factor

Student agency is the significant factor which determines how students react or interpret the many situations they encounter, and examples were present throughout the collected interview data. When considering the importance of agency and international students, it is seen by Tran and Vu (2018) as being recognisable in those who actively, intentionally and rationally make choices that affect their lives. Moses et al. (2020) view agency as intentional acts used to guide or contain situations or events, and this includes self-regulation which can involve thoughtful analysis and management of a person's emotions or abilities. Agency is not an exclusive trait and can be witnessed in many different forms and settings with different outcomes (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). Gebauer et al. (2021) report

that the cultural and academic background and experiences of a student can determine how they respond to various learning challenges. Tran and Vu (2018) make the point that agency for students from international backgrounds is significantly underexplored, but it is a consequential factor throughout the detailed experiences of the research participants in this research. The relevance of students' desire to enact change and to aspire towards their objectives is evident in their responses.

Agency in international students identifies that the students make difficult and challenging commitments, as this research has revealed, but they do so with clear objectives to which they are intent on realising. They act with agency through making empowered decisions on their futures. However, when targets or objectives are obscured or confused and attaining them becomes less realistic, the student's outlook changes. In these cases, agency is diminished, and students are left to make sense of their position and future direction, and sometimes without traditional support networks such as family and close friends. In all examples, student agency was determinative both for deciding objectives which were decided on prior to study in Ireland, and for guiding students' decision making while in university.

7.2.1 Agency as a response

It is important to acknowledge the significance of agency for students from overseas, and especially those from Asian countries, as they are commonly misrepresented. Tran and Vu (2018) point to distinct depictions of Asian students as passive learners with a dearth of critical thinking capabilities required for learning in 'western' higher education. It is also noted that students are also seen as deficient because studies regularly focus on negative elements, including language and cultural differences. However, these views do not correspond to those shared by the participants in their interviews, and it is appropriate to agree with Marginson (2013) who stipulates that students are 'self-dependent adults', and not 'dependent children' (p.11). Undergraduate and postgraduate participants reflected on this position and explained that they saw their opportunity to study overseas as one where they could prove to parents that they could not only survive

or cope with the challenges, but also actually thrive as international students. For example, Declan (U4) spoke firstly of his pride in being a student in the Irish university, and then of his determination to succeed. He was aware of what his experience offered him and felt that he had equipped himself effectively prior to starting university. We can recognise the students like Declan (U4) in this research as agents who seek to affect change in their own lives by acting in their best interests.

7.2.2 Dispositional, Motivational, and Positional Agency

In many ways, students have taken charge of their future by deciding to study overseas. Vaughn (2020) describes agency in three categories: dispositional, motivational and positional. The definition of each is relevant, although neither is more or less important and any prominence is as a result of the data collected and interpretation.

Dispositional: Based on individuals' disposition, or their tendency or way they act in circumstances, this categorisation focuses on how much one understands their self. It is characterised by initiative and purposefulness. From this research we may witness dispositional agency in creative and entrepreneurial acts.

Motivational: Vaughn explains that motivational elements of agency are reliant on the ability to focus on ideas and actions, and from this there is a need for reflection. An important aspect is making decisions and responding to challenges. Motivational elements of agency are present in examples from all students who detail their original reasons for choosing to study in Ireland, but also in other more challenging relational issues which arise.

Positional: The interaction between individuals' and their environment or peers has a pivotal role in agency, and is vital in the cases of students studying far away from home. Agency in this category is described as 'co-created' through interactions and discussions which lead to acts or decisions. Agency, Vaughan explains, does not happen in exclusivity but is the product of community from which individuals can gain an understanding of themselves.

Vaughn's (2020) model is complimentary, as each element of agency provides a balanced understanding of how various elements of agency can interact while not allowing a particular aspect to be dominant. This model provides a supportive framework to understand agency at a practical level by giving various components which can be addressed by different parties.

There are alternative understandings of agency, and especially for international students. Tran and Vu (2018) introduce agency for becoming, acknowledge the transformative nature of international study both for the students as participants but also for enhancing the possibilities for the wider community or similar. While many aspects of agency of becoming are appropriate to this research, it too narrowly prioritises the intentional aspects of agency. Vaughn's (2020) categories of dispositional and motivational agency allow for a more accurate understanding. Another issue which is relevant is that while new studies on agency have become prominent, few address Chinese students. Bai and Wang (2022) point out that Chinese students are the largest group of international students in the world, and many have experienced both Chinese and overseas educations systems. From their position, they see Chinese students balancing between both their old Chinese identity and their new international student identity. These students' agency is driven by their past, motivated by the future, and acquired and manifested in their present.

7.3 Themes emerging from analysis

Analysis of findings has shown that there is no perfect or exact representation which categorises all international students, and this variety within the interviews must be viewed as critical. Integral to the participant responses was the need for independence, the opportunity or availability of transferable experiences, and a belonging to their respective academic and social environments. The importance of each three themes is amplified by the efficacy of students' agency which guides and hinders in a variety of fashions. These elements present students and their experiences, both in learning and living in Ireland, as complex and non-linear. This analysis shall present a snapshot of the students who choose to study in Ireland and call for more in-depth questioning of how students from overseas interact with the

Irish higher education environment, and how it benefits their outlooks as they continue in their careers.

The fundamental role of agency directs the discussion on the unifying elements within the themes which emerged and were analysed. Independence, experiencing transferable experiences, and obtaining a sense of belonging to their environment are the factors which emerged which reveal the extent to which student outlooks were impacted. These aspects were ever-present within the data.

7.3.1 To be different – what do International Students want?

To discuss agency and international students, Marginson (2013) provides an important starting point which influences the analysis of the findings of this research:

> "All international students cross the border to become different, whether through learning, through graduating with a degree, through immersion in the linguistic setting, or simply through growing up. Often there is a kind of person they want to become, though none can fully imagine that person before the transformation. Some respond to change only when they must. Many let it happen. Others run to meet it." (p. 7)

To become different is an important categorisation, and one which was evident. Even if all students from overseas are categorised as international, each sees their own reasons for deciding to study overseas as unique and personal. Saying that becoming different as an objective is a generalisation, but it is suitable as the variety and expanse of interpretations available to becoming different suits the population to which it applies.

7.3.2 Defining the themes

Analysis will show that students' outlooks on their learning and lived experiences are determined by the availability and accessibility of opportunities to develop independence, gain transferable experiences, and acquire a sense of belonging as a student.

Independence: defined by students which explains students' feeling of learning and adapting to new surroundings. Students sought independence from their family but also the skills which they would develop while caring for themselves and making decisions on their own.

Transferable experiences: living and study overseas needed to provide experiences which could benefit students when they returned to their homes. It was expected that an international degree would be of great benefit, but other experiences would enhance employment opportunities if they could be acquired.

Belonging: the opportunity to live and study overseas offered students unique personal relationships that impacted on their identity and provided new outlooks on the future. Students connected with people and their environments differently which helped to create relationships. Belonging is a non-measurable but important facet of study overseas experience.

These key elements effectuated responses in interviews and the themes which have emerged from the findings guide the analysis of findings provided here.

These themes have revealed key factors which are pertinent to Chinese students who choose to study in Ireland, but which have not been explored before. Indeed, policy documents fail to acknowledge that at the very core of each student's motivation for study and the execution of their overseas study plans is a desire to achieve a personal objective. The policy which focuses on attracting students objectively neglects to understand the students, and this is a considerable oversight. For policy on attracting students to be responsive to the desires and ambitions of students, it must take greater account of students' agency when seeking to provide a more attractive experience for international learners.

7.4 Independence: ways which students sought greater 'independence'

Becoming independent was an established idea among the research participants to this study. Numerous understandings of becoming independent were presented, and

in almost all situations, it was the individual's own interpretation of the word, rather than a theoretical one. In several instances students felt that by being an international student they would gain more personal independence. Equally, participants explained that they sought independence or the feeling of being independent.

The word 'independence' was applied to explain different states of being. One understanding of independence which was expressed frequently was to be less dependent on parents or family for completing day-to-day tasks, like cooking or cleaning. This explanation preceded more complex tasks related to managing applications and administrative tasks involved with applying for university and living in Ireland. It was frequently raised that the participants felt that this was important for them, and studying in another country where their family had little impact would grant this chance. It was not only their feeling, but one shared by family who saw studying overseas as ideal in cases like this.

From the position of teaching and learning, participants did not express a need for independent learning skills, and seemed satisfied and accepted that studying overseas brought significant challenges. Students who discussed academic issues did not address negative interactions with teaching faculty and in cases where academic progress was referred to it was often positive or as a way of expressing relief to know that fellow students were facing the same challenges. Even in cases where language was an impediment, structures were in place that allowed students to follow up on learning in lectures or classrooms. This challenges the perception that international students struggle to meet academic goals, which was raised as an issue by Tran and Vu (2018).

7.4.1 Seeking new opportunities beyond the classroom

Opportunities and experiences available which enabled greater independence relating to internships or work, diverse learning practices, and improvement of English language use are measurable through participation rates and recorded results. However, students also saw overseas study as a mechanism for building independence, and this offers a new understanding of international students' expectations of their time studying overseas. This need to become something that

could not be clearly defined, namely independence, is notably a clear example of individual agency which has driven the students to travel to another country to seek it out. The initial examples presented, such as needing to cook or order food are far from rudimentary, and because many categorically detailed their pride and excitement for achieving these tasks, the relevance of these actions is made more certain. Such outliers provide important clues to comprehending the mindset of students who study far away from home. To gauge the extent of this, one participant in the study explained that because she lived with her family who had also migrated to Ireland, she felt that the same level of experience as others who relied on themselves to get by would be unattainable. This is contrasted by both undergraduate and postgraduate students who emphasised that the absence of their parents meant they depended solely on themselves, which had previously been impossible.

Students wished to become more independent, and studying overseas was considered a suitable way to attain a level of independence which was unattainable through study in their home country. It was not established where this understanding came from, although peer networks were involved in communicating this. It may be that study overseas was a means of attaining independence more directly and in a shorter space of time. Independence is important, and students have linked it closely to their expected outcomes from study in Ireland. Especially in students who prioritised employment as an eventual necessary outcome was independence highly sought.

7.4.2 Two sides to independence

Discussing independence produced an uneven response. Some students were happy to benefit from some but not all aspect of studying overseas, it was unclear that all elements of being alone in another country had been considered by the students. One aspect which troubled students was making friends. Even this comes with limitations, as students may endure other hardships or neglect if they consider this outcome over others. From student accounts, it was unclear if universities made efforts to ensure that students were made to feel that their needs were being met.

Students who study overseas partake in a wide range of activities and gain experiences from them. Experiences should be categorised carefully, not only because it is an important aspect of an individual's time in the host country (Ireland) but also because these lived experiences present the stories which explain the lives of these students. From the data presented, the experiences which students considered of value could largely be considered in two categories, namely inconveniences of living in Ireland and becoming independent. The collected data revealed that while living in Ireland presented many inconveniences, the opportunity to become more independent was seen as a necessity. The participants widely saw their experience of living overseas as an opportunity to meet their personal and future professional needs for greater independence. While the differences between Ireland and home were accepted, it was an uncomfortable process which caused problems for all participants. Julie (U7) is a good example of this, as she told of her plans to study in the United States but saw her single year of study in Ireland as a vital step in preparing to move to graduate school. In this case, we initially encounter motivational agency, but this is accompanied by dispositional agency as it is her desire that encourages her to persist. She wanted to be sure that she could handle the differences, and chose to only study overseas in her final year. Previously, she had decided that, even though she could have studied overseas, she felt she wanted to prove it to herself that she could survive China's notorious higher education system. As a student, her own goals drove her decisions and she felt that she was successfully completing the challenges she had made for herself. The dispositional and motivational agency on display gave her greater confidence and empowered her to make firm decisions and trust her agency.

7.4.3 Opportunities and expectations

Study overseas presented opportunities to become self-reliant which students viewed as essential. The chance to foster greater independence in a similar way by studying in China was not possible, either because there are few similar options in Chinese higher education which were already saturated with applicants, or they simply just do not exist in a satisfactory form.

Those who study overseas see achieving independence as an expectation from their learning and living experience as an international student. As an expected result, actions or events which reduce or limit the impact of independence were viewed negatively. For example, some students saw the quality of public transport or internet speed as a regular inconvenience, but at the same time this was not a major issue as it was part of the experience. Support networks usually work effectively in these situations, and if these are unavailable the need for spaces or locations where students could feel more secure is mentioned or implied. Students saw these as places they could visit, such as the safety of their rented room, or in the community of friends from home or new friends from university. In each case, they did not refer to an organisation or facility managed or supported directly by the university they studied in. In these examples, students rely on agency to be resourceful in building meaningful networks, and some had more success than others.

Examples of student resourcefulness in seeking social spaces which indirectly provided support and friendship can be examined. It was common for students to try to build close personal relationships with classmates, but in certain cases the students who created social groups beyond this seemed to exert greater confidence. It could be that this confidence grew from the independence they proffered through their attempts to get to know more people when they were in a foreign country. In this case, examples stand out and these include Ray (P10) who joined a foreign language society and from there invited others to come and cook together, and Damien (U2) who found opportunities to volunteer with a homelessness charity in Dublin's inner city. In neither example did the host university or any organisation encourage or support these students in finding their direction. The students in both examples recognised that they had to create their own opportunities and act with intention. Ray (P10) explained that his co-workers in China had shown that they were confident, knowledgeable, and well informed, and this had been attributed to their background studying overseas. Ray (P10) saw himself exhibiting the same characteristics and knew that to do this he would have to be assertive in building relationships. Damien (U2) believed that he had a duty as a Catholic to volunteer to help those in need and viewed helping or volunteering as

an important aspect of his Catholic identity. These examples display motivational agency in action, as both students were intent on achieving particular goals and acted to achieve it. Their actions involved prior consideration and planning which led them to seek opportunities.

In cases where the physical safety of the students' home was threatened, the level of anxiety was heightened. This research encountered two participants presenting challenges related to their home, and it was evident that these were problems for the students to fix on their own. These include the relative price of renting accommodation which seems equivalent to London, while in another case, a student's unsatisfactory on-campus housing was caused by noise from neighbours or roommates who moved around late at night. Both situations caused concern for specific and personal reasons. The price of accommodation jeopardised the possibility of remaining in Ireland over an extended period. The poor sound-proofing upset the student's sleep patterns and proved particularly stressful. In either case, the students were required to make extra efforts to make their position more secure. This example of positional agency shows how students may be made to change their plans, but it shows that these students have the capacity to make their own suitable changes, rather than passively accepting decisions. The living situation appears to have been a priority, and when upset, it caused concerns where participants questioned the suitability of their study destination.

7.4.4 Independence as a criterion for successful study overseas

These cases of students presenting varying experiences point to the centrality of building personal independence as a criterion for studying abroad. While there were instances which were negative, be they in relation to their living conditions or day to day interactions, there was not much evidence to that suggest these experiences were formative. This means that even though students encountered challenges which caused problems or significant challenges, the individuals responded deliberately and with agency. Challenges were part of the experience of studying overseas which would later lead them to the outcomes of their study, and in the cases analysed, the students felt that some of their desired outcomes were being realised.

7.5 Transferable experiences

It was widely expressed that experiences from studying in Ireland should carry value beyond Ireland, and that the learning or internships would offer a positive position to continue their career. As expected, students considered different elements to the type of experience which could be of value when studies were completed. Academic and working experiences were both valued and were dependent on each participant's needs. The transferability of experience was not limited to classroom or professional experiences, but also to daily life. Several students felt that even just living in Ireland was advantageous even if they were unable to stipulate the main reasons for this.

7.5.1 Thinking beyond the qualification

Obtaining a bachelors or masters' degree from an Irish university is a key objective for students, but the way that this is achieved and their experiences during this process vary significantly. In this research, the participants were largely pursuing different degrees so each person had quite different learning experiences, such as ways in which they were taught or methods of assessment. Also, relationships and interactions with classmates, faculty and others involved in their programmes of study will have had an influential role. While learning experiences seemed important, it appears that methods of assessment were of concern but were not considered as impediments, unless there were requirements to secure internships or work experience. Undergraduate students, while younger and less conscious of future career challenges, displayed awareness and maturity regarding their studies and futures. In turn, postgraduate students were focused on the professional benefits expected from their study choices, but this was not the exclusive goal, and in several cases the ways students learned carried similar value to the course contents. Despite limitations imposed by language or interactions with other students, the experiences in classes and lectures were seen as an integral element of the study abroad experience. Students' positional agency played an important role in these situations, as they felt courses of study would not make concessions to accommodate their student concerns.

7.6 Belonging

Students described feelings of belonging within their course or study programme as having a largely positive influence on their outlook. Notably, belonging was reserved for the individual course or faculty, and not directly towards the actual university. Belonging was dependent on individual relationships with classmates, and to a lesser extent to the faculty who taught and supported the students academically. However, measuring belonging is difficult and impractical for HEIs because it is highly individualised and disconnected from institutional targets. Belonging held an important role in students coping mechanisms during challenging situations, and this was notably the case for postgraduate students.

Belonging plays a significant role in the integration of international students within courses and campuses. Students with a greater sense of belonging are reputed to benefit not only socially but also academically (Glass, 2018). Together with a sense of meaning-in-life, belonging acts positively to counter negative factors, which can include discrimination and language difficulties. Glass and Westmont (2014) suggest that due to the pressure of meeting the same academic standards as domestic students, belonging plays a greater role. When belonging is limited or proves difficult to establish, the effects are significant and students who explained that they felt distanced from their courses and struggled to measure the value of their experience lacked the resilience which was evident among students exhibiting greater sense of belonging.

7.6.1 Relationship with their institution

Each student developed a distinct and personal relationship with their university. Satisfaction, a measurable marker for universities and education providers to gauge the success of programmes, appears to rely on the impression the university makes on the student. In Irish universities and other HEIs, levels of satisfaction with their HEI and course of study are viewed as being high (Finn & Darmody, 2017). This information does not distinguish between student nationality or cultural background, nor does it address the academic success of students from overseas. Satisfaction is not only subjective, but it also only refers to the students' impression of their HEI, and other factors should be evaluated. Accordingly, Rivas,

Burke and Hale (2019) highlight extensive issues across higher education which limit international students' ability to meet their expectations, including the ability to build connections and relationships with other students. This is also an issue in Ireland, and it is explained that some universities attempt to force intercultural relationship building by housing students from different nationalities, which is not considered helpful (O'Connor, 2018).

These points allow for discussion on the way international students are considered in HEIs in Ireland and overseas. There are suggestions that there is disparity between how international students and domestic students are received on campuses, and that opinions and experiences of students from overseas and domestic students should be treated as different. However, Jones (2017) argues that the efficacy of research which differentiates by a student's nationality is limited and fails to acknowledge that students occupy diverse educational settings. What this explains is that it is not satisfactory for international students to be categorised only in this way. With the development of internationalisation policy since 2010, O'Connor (2018) explains the need for Irish education and immigration policy to respond to increased societal diversity by creating a more homogenous environment for all in Ireland. However, Irish research on internationalisation has not engaged with specific populations and understanding of international students is largely based on North American and European students.

7.6.1.1 Existing provision

Research prioritised the experiences of students and the analysis did not evaluate or analyse the attempts by the HEIs to engage with or provide services to students. Interviews confirmed a number of activities which were launched, but because participants were largely unaware then it is unrealistic to present these with details of students experiences in Irish universities. In addition, because participants joined from different colleges or departments, experiences of international student supports were different. The example of a buddy student is a positive example, but it is a rare example of departments taking a proactive stance. Additionally, independently organised international student societies were active and welcoming but were mostly frequented by international students.

Universities had active international offices and programmes for students, but their impact varied. Those offices which scheduled a calendar of events or maintained an active social media presence were seen as providers of services exclusive to international students, and in ways this was unattractive. It was reported that much of the attention paid to engaging with newly arrived international students took place during the early stages, with events ceasing after the initial weeks of the semester. Participants reported that there were numerous events directed at welcoming students, but that these were largely seen as events for international students so they were poorly attended by domestic students. As these events would offer few chances to meet or talk with domestic students, so this was problematic.

7.6.2 Undergraduates and study overseas

Undergraduate students largely saw study in an English-speaking country as their opportunity for future professional success and to gain a level of prestige amongst peers. Participants found the overall benefits hard to stipulate considering they had not experienced much education aside from secondary school before arriving in university. As they could recognise this themselves, they were not overly concerned at the point of interview. The undergraduates specifically spoke of diverse classrooms and stated that the material they studied was accessible. They spoke keenly of classroom activities and ways in which they participated in or experienced learning. These meaningful actions showed them that they were students in the university, and they did not feel classified or viewed in any other way. Despite some initial welcoming efforts, little had been done to engage with the students, although it seems that these students were not lacking from this limited engagement. While they said they had adapted to their class dynamic, it was still important for classmates to consider them as members of their class, and because of this the students felt the group dynamic was inclusive of them.

7.6.3.1 Proud to be a student

In some cases, a few undergraduate students expressed that they were quite proud to be students in their university. This was a feeling that was attached to their status as students as distinct from *international* students. In addition, they felt that they could take time to consider their longer-term futures both as students and

after graduation, but it was not a topic which caused concern as students felt assured by their programme choice and were conscious that they were only beginning their academic journeys. When students begin this journey together, they appear to find it easier to build close relationships and are comfortable moving in and out of these circles. The diversity of class groups helps, as there may be individual cohorts of Chinese students, Irish students, and other nationalities, but because they study and complete projects in mixed groups, no real issues were defined. This was evident in the case of Mary (U5) who felt she would fail her first set of exams but stated that she felt she received a confidence boost from fellow Irish students who were equally relieved to have avoided failing. Likewise, when discussing course content some students referred to the learning as a shared activity and described the content using the words 'we are looking' at, rather than language which would suggest it as being more an individual action. The significance of completing the actions in community with others, specifically classmates, tells of shared impressions explained by other undergraduates. These students were empowered and encouraged because they were made to feel as a part of their class group, and they did not have a different status even though they are categorised as an international student. The way that students were learning favourably increased their feeling of agency, and this gave them the feeling of ownership and belonging in their chosen courses. This is more than just feeling welcome among their groups, it is about feeling as a part of the group and a sense of belonging within the environment. These examples of belonging were quite evident from the experiences shared by undergraduates who were in their first year.

7.6.3.2 Difficulties establishing connections

Many of the undergraduate students in their first year of study appear to have benefitted from joining courses where the international student body was diverse and students were given equal chances. For undergraduate students it was more difficult when entering a course later in the programme, such as during a mandatory academic year overseas. Many domestic students especially had already built their own networks and were looking towards the next step. In this one case, Julie (U7) described she was participating in a long-established partnership

agreement and the students had been excited to study in Dublin and build relationships, but this proved to be difficult to achieve. Despite attempts to build relationships with domestic students, building relationships with students from Ireland was difficult. It was evident that there had been little attempt to integrate students into the courses which they had to study, and this made her question her expectations and reconsider the value of her time studying in Ireland. She saw the challenges and disconnect she felt from underperforming academically as a problem. Also, despite relying on her own agency in many aspects of her student life in Ireland, the most important area of making meaningful friendships with Irish people seemed to have been unsuccessful.

7.6.3 Challenges for postgraduates

The examples from undergraduate students can be observed with greater perspicuity amongst postgraduate students. As explained, placing students in groups and accounting for the group as diverse based on the range or variety of nationalities ignores the complexities involved when trying to build relationships or friendships. When groups are together and there is no conflict, it does not mean there is concord, and a greater attempt to offer students the chance to harness meaningful friendships and relationships should be explored. It is necessary to recall that post-graduate students' agency was motivational and dispositional which allowed for certain expectations for their study overseas plans. But, in all cases these students were entering very different academic settings and cultures. In addition, the postgraduate students' personal experiences prior to arriving in Ireland are significant. Those with experience of working full-time before coming to study showed more resilience and maturity that allowed them to harness the social capital which led to more meaningful outcomes, while most postgraduate students who progressed directly from undergraduate to postgraduate study encountered situations where they struggled to feel at ease when socialising and making friends with domestic students.

7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks

Postgraduate experiences were also impacted in a range of ways. Joanne (P6) talked in depth about the ways she felt increasingly isolated from her learning. As it

was largely lecture based, she did not get many opportunities to meet or socialise with classmates who seemed to be busy. She did not reflect directly on a negative academic experience, but she did not feel that she was benefitting fully from her time learning, and this caused her concern. As she had little interaction with classmates, she felt uncertain about important choices regarding work placements and was not sure how to explore other opportunities. Laura (P11) was also dispirited by the lack of connections she could make in her classes, as she had transferred her academic focus she already lacked surety in her subject. She had made this decision aware of the challenges she could cause but had hoped for a closer class group from which to share or draw knowledge from. In both instances, the students' dispositional agency had taken them to a point, but without others to help, they felt weakened, and their opportunities felt less attainable. In particular, Joanne (P6) felt quite isolated by her situation. Her motivational and dispositional agency were limited by unfamiliarity with Ireland, and access to some help or support may have empowered her further to be able to visualise her targets.

7.6.3.2 Agency as a response to situations

When discussing experiences, the students refer directly to their own actions which they took, and the results of their action. The students who seemed to flourish appear to have taken actions relating more directly with their background or skills, indicating their confidence and dispositional agency. In one specific case, Ray (P10) was driven by his ambition to be an internationally educated professional in his field. He made it clear that the experiential benefits of living and studying overseas were a significant motivation for choosing overseas study, and he held no compunctions for engaging in a wide range of group activities. He was eager to build friendships and have a rewarding experience while studying for his master's degree, and he was very active in trying to achieve this. Students with professional experience used their strengths to ensure that they could make the most of their status as a student. Niall (P1), for example, was able to help curate an exhibition on Chinese art while Laura (P11) used her graphic design experience and knowledge to foster meaningful friendships in her classes. He was certain of his knowledge in his subject area after working in Chinese art museums, and he was even confident enough to recognise fake art paintings in a famous Dublin museum. He was an

experienced international student and used agency academically and socially. Students were adamant in their understanding that a higher degree from overseas was a necessity for career progression, and they displayed high levels of motivational agency which other postgraduate students lacked. This drove their actions in the classroom but also in how they engaged with many aspects of being an international student.

7.6.3.3 Using International study to broaden student mindset

Actions or responses to situations were not only driven by career objectives or hoped for outcomes, but also by the desire to acquire new perspectives and viewpoints which were restricted in the home country. Niamh (P9), who was studying Equality Studies, explained that being presented with the freedom to openly discuss sensitive political or social issues encouraged her, and this was not possible in China and especially among family members. She saw studying overseas as a process whereby her learning would equip her to cope with future challenges, and because she had positive experiences in Ireland, she felt that it was a good decision. She did not deny that she would like to use her degree to get a better job in the future, but she saw this as less as a priority to her expanding her knowledge. Her positional agency provided by a positive learning experience was only possible because she had not only been dispositional in desiring to study overseas, but also motivational. In her case, she had been impressed by the 'Yes' campaign which legalised marriage between same sex couples and felt that Ireland would be welcoming to people who wished to discuss different viewpoints.

These examples from postgraduate students provide evidence of the importance of student practice and detail the importance for understanding the background to why students chose to study overseas. Students see their study as an element within an ongoing process, rather than a once-off experience. Deuchar (2022) reports that students are conscious of their status within the globalised systems and spaces which education operates. These spaces are constantly shifting and are described as 'fluid, dynamic and mobile' (Deuchar, 2022, p. 509). Individual decisions or practices do not happen in isolation and a firmer understanding or appreciation for students' consciously made actions and mediated choices would

allow for appreciation of the agency which is prominent amongst international students. This agency is rarely given a full account by analysis which sees responding to satisfaction and positive or negative experiences is a kind of panacea of international students' ailments.

7.6.4 Limitations of Student Experience

Policy on internationalisation appears to neglect the presence of study agency and the idea of belonging directly, and instead it focuses on the concept of student experience. Recent research in Ireland has mirrored this focus and attention has looked in the direction of student experience (O'Reilly, Hickey and Ryan, 2013, 2015; Finn and Darmody, 2017). Discussions on student experience are common, but as the term encompasses such a wide swathe of influential factors in a student's life it can be loosely applied.

7.6.4.1 Student experience in the Irish context

Student experience appears frequently in Irish policy documents for internationalisation, and this has laid some groundwork which helps to focus on developing better experiences for students. In recent years, Clarke, Yang and Harmon (2018) report on internationalisation of Irish higher education took the step to understand the perceptions international students held of Irish education. Notably, students welcomed that it was evident that both domestic and international students required support, and it was suggested that institutions were becoming more comfortable with more culturally diverse classrooms. This contrasts with O'Reilly, Hickey and Ryan (2013) who pointed to a feeling that international students were an added responsibility who also struggled with personal issues due to studying overseas. There is warrant for this belief, as significant research indicates that language assessment, such as IELTS, was not a robust means for preparation for university study in English (Hyatt, 2013), while Clark and Yu (2021) have found that some students face academic challenges which their language preparation does not equip them for.

A lack of interaction with domestic or Irish students has been noted and can be seen to hinder any generally positive impression of an international learning experience. Friendships satisfy personal and emotional needs, and can be key in

elements such as acculturation, success and satisfaction, and the numerous friendship groups can be influential. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) suggest that students who can rely on varying friendship groups, notably co-national, other international students, and friends or contacts from the host nation can typically face adverse challenges from international study confidently. Importantly, this introduction to student experience suggests that experience is complex to interpret.

7.6.4.2 Recognising the uses of student experience for directing policy

Student experience and engagement are still looked on as an important criterion as it can be conceived as a measurable factor. Higher education leadership frequently sources analysis of student satisfaction through a national student survey where students can register their level of appreciation with various elements of study across higher education in Ireland. The national survey, studentsurvey.ie, serves its purpose as it provides concrete evidence regarding student relationships with their studies, although the nature of a nationwide survey like this can be misleading. As the line of questioning seeks only specific answers on subjective experiences, this does not address that there could be a grey area, as the survey format suggests that satisfaction or dissatisfaction are seen as clear opposites. The 2021 survey offered students only four possible answers in most cases, and only short spaces to share information in their own words. With regards international students, Níc Fhlannchadha (2022) explained that the view was that Irish higher education institutes were able to provide a comparable educational experience to students from overseas as Irish or domestic students obtained. It was recognised that students showed more engagement with courses than domestic students. According to Ammigan and Jones (2018), national surveys hold an important function for universities as they can target areas in need of improvement or development, and when international students are targeted directly the results can provide more targeted responses. Interestingly, there is an overlap and similarity in questioning in students' surveys, which is both an explanation and justification for the Irish survey of students (O'Regan & Harmon, 2016). A result of this is that universities appear to tailor for similar results, and this is exemplified by Ammigan and Jones'

(2018) findings which highlight satisfaction in shared areas, such as quality of facilities, but leave other areas unexplored, such as how students perceive their future options. This is one of the main limitations for relying on survey data when trying to comprehend student feelings. The findings from the research conducted for this project shall question and provide details on these elements.

7.6.5 Agency, belonging and student experience

The data which policy relies on for understanding student experience or engagement is limited by the detail or amount of information which can be collected. By example, providing possible answers limits a student from truly expressing their opinions and willingly exercise their agency. Students who participated in this research explained that they were happy, proud, and glad to be students in the university they had chosen. The students were not without their reasons, and their motivational agency had acted in preparing them for the challenge. Students shared their ambition to succeed both academically and professionally and had the self-awareness and capacity to respond to academic and social issues.

Agency appears as a critical component in building students' sense of belonging, which is necessary for harnessing effective and lasting relationships between the student and host university or nation. This is important for internationalisation because students see it as important. Having actively chosen a university and invested a significant sum of money in their studies, the resulting connection which is manifested through learning and living should be respected. As active agents who experience the university, all students, international or otherwise, should be treated equally. Research collected from this study did uncover direct cases where students were treated disrespectfully but there were instances were equitable approaches would benefit students who were unfamiliar with study overseas or study in Ireland. The agentive attitudes of students were not universal, and due to the unfamiliar settings of Irish university campuses and systems it was recognised that positional agency may have decreased the impact of motivational and dispositional forms of agency.

7.6.5.1 Student reflections on experiences and belonging

The postgraduate student Joanne (P6) gave an important account of this. She had chosen Ireland as she had studied for a short period before, and she had had a positive experience. She had studied in UK based university located in China and explained that the prevailing direction for students was to study overseas when they graduated. The student recognised the importance of this next step, but also felt that having studied with a UK institution she would be prepared for study in Ireland. Due to the ongoing issues within her course such as a lack of meaningful contact with Irish classmates, and unclear pathways which related to the final dissertation or work experience project, she grew concerned and uncertain. The reduced positional agency resulted in her seeking a safe place to clear her mind, which she did by discussing with friend who travelled with her from China but studied in a different school. The action, seeking out security in a safe place, was her way of acquiring positional agency through her friendship which she had struggled to build in her class group.

Alternatively, Sarah (P12) experienced belonging differently. While she wished for another Chinese speaking friend in her class group to help her fully understand all of the concepts being discussed, she was welcomed as a valued and important member by her diverse class group. She was highly motivated from an early age and had only chosen Europe over Japan in recent years. Her eventual reason for choosing Ireland was because she received a small scholarship. Her positional agency was regularly challenged but by being welcomed in the class and being active working on shared projects she felt welcome. In addition, as part of the learning the course provided clear interactions with industry groups which allowed for the student to gain direct access to important Irish companies to assist with developing solutions. This was unexpected and helped her form not only a close relationship with her classmates but gave her a strong sense that her education and time in Ireland was valuable.

7.7 Concluding remarks

Agency among international students has shown to be a notable feature which allows them to navigate the challenges of living and studying in Irish higher

educational settings. The main issues of independence, transferable experiences, and belonging, have highlighted the significance of agency. Vaughn's (2020) model which describes dispositional, motivational, and positional agency has shown it to be relevant and helpful to understand and recognise the ways that students interact within their environments.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

8.1 Revisiting the research questions

This research provides students with a voice within the wider dialogue of internationalisation in Ireland. The correlation between students' lived experiences' and the aspirations of government policy on increasing internationalisation in Irish higher education is also ascertained. The outcomes are informed and directed by the responses to three research questions:

1. Why do international students choose to come to Ireland and how do their experiences meet with their expectations?
2. How is the Irish government's intention to develop global citizens compatible with international students own educational objectives? Is the learning relevant to the students' aspirations?
3. In what ways can increased awareness of the needs and demands of international students impact the development of Ireland's international education environment, and can Ireland's own social and historical experiences lend to this learning process?

This investigation delved into the lived experience of the research participants, and questioning allowed for students to interpret and explain how they felt their time in Ireland as a student was progressing. Through evaluation of policy and data collection from students by interview, answers to these questions shall form the basis for concluding this discussion. This will allow for an interpretation of the developing outlooks of international students in Ireland and offer necessary insight for the future internationalisation of higher education in Ireland.

It will be possible interpret the developing outlooks of international students in Ireland, which can offer insight on future international education policy in Ireland.

8.1.1 Why do international students choose to come to Ireland and how do their experiences meet with their expectations?

The responses which were collected discussed the origins of students education journey in detail. When discussing the reasons why Ireland was chosen as a destination for study, responses attracted a diverse range of responses which offer insights into the mindsets of those who choose to study overseas.

- A university education in an English-speaking country was universally seen as a distinct advantage, although there were variations in the reasons why it was seen this way. Participants looked beyond the need to acquire or improve English, and focused on other opportunities, such as the potential to work or live in Ireland (See: 6.4.1 Decisions and choices while studying overseas – undergraduate experiences; 6.4.2 Future opportunities and necessity for overseas study - postgraduate experiences; 7.5.1 Thinking beyond the qualification).

- Decisions on study overseas avoided any discernible pattern and were largely complex personal decisions. Family and friends had a significant influence on the decision-making process (See: 6.4.1 Decisions and choices while studying overseas – undergraduate experiences; 6.5.2 Paying for study overseas; 7.2.1 Agency as a response).

- Students who chose Ireland were seeking an alternative experience to those typically expected in other English-speaking destinations. However, of greatest significance was a need to become more independent. Independence was not considered to be an overly burdensome expectation. Several initial interpretations considered cooking or cleaning by themselves as satisfactory. (See: 6.3.1 Independence; 7.4 Independence: ways which students sought greater 'independence'; 7.4.2 Two sides to independence)

- There were strong desires, especially among participants who had never lived away from home or had travelled infrequently, to be more independent and capable of addressing challenges or taking opportunities. They were especially driven to be more accountable for the decisions taken free from

parental pressure or influence (See: 6.3.1 Independence; 7.4.4 Independence as a criterion for successful study overseas).

- Diverse learning experiences and opportunities for new learning experiences were a feature of all students who participated. In some cases, students were very satisfied with their progress and with the range of opportunities which would be completely inaccessible in Chinese settings (See: 6.4.3.1 Language and learning; 6.4.3.2. Expectations and reality for undergraduates).
- Living and studying on a university campus or in private accommodation in Ireland proved to be extremely challenging. These could be evidenced in:
    - Costs (See: 6.3.2 Living in Ireland; 7.4.3 Opportunities and expectations)
    - Socialising (See: 6.6.1 New students and new relationships – undergraduate social networks)
    - Building friendships (See: 6.6.2 Finding meaning in relationships – postgraduate social networks; (7.4.2 Two sides of independence)
- There was a lack of uniformity in approaches to internationalisation, whereby some students felt connected and welcomed by their university (See: 6.6.2.3 Proactive support for students), while others struggled to find a sense of place in their learning environment (See: 6.6.2.4 Student expectations, demands, and workloads; 7.6.2.2 Difficulties establishing connections; 7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks).

Agency is posited as an integral element within the situations described here. The decisions made by students are earlier examples of motivational and dispositional agency and the outcomes can be observed in data collected from throughout this research.

8.1.2 How is the Irish government's intention to develop global citizens compatible with international students own educational objectives? Is the learning relevant to the students' aspirations?

Irish internationalisation strategies looked to offer relevant educational experiences for international students, and enhancing global citizenship was targeted as a way of facilitating this. Justifying the development of global citizenship is complicated as the initial intention was formulated without consultation with international students. In interviews, global citizenship was not sufficiently referred to and did not appear as central to the Irish learning experience. Despite this, it is possible to highlight facets of global citizenship as defined by Nussbaum (1997), which are explained as the ability to critically examine the self, as well as actively consider relationships with others and the 'reality of distant lives' (Nussbaum 1997 p.10). A narrative imagination which is aware of emotions and desires of others is a final element for the mindset of a global citizen. This understanding shall guide the following responses.

- Students presented themselves as active global citizens, and they used their agency in interactions and relationships in attempts to overcome or process challenges they faced. When students encountered situations where their active expressions of global citizenship were not reciprocated, it proved very difficult to comprehend and research participants struggled to process it (See: 7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks)
- International students from this research looked for diverse learning experiences. This does not align with ideas relevant to global citizenship, as the learning in the Irish settings was considered sufficient in relation to the Chinese student's expectations (See: 6.4.3.1 Language and learning; 6.4.3.2. Expectations and reality for undergraduates; 7.6.3.1 Proud to be a student).
- Students spoke widely of situations and incidents where the values of global citizenship seemed non-existent. These include instances where students struggled to build relationships with domestic students, and situations where it was suggested some domestic students failed to comprehend reasons why

students from very different backgrounds can think or act differently (See: 7.6.2.2 Difficulties establishing connections; 7.6.5 Agency, belonging and student experience).

- Participants wished to learn from their Irish experiences, while also expressing empathy and understanding on why actions were interpreted or conducted in unfamiliar or challenging ways. It was clear that international students displayed significant willingness to engage with ideas relating to global citizenship, and actively fulfilled global citizenship's criteria (See: 7.6.3.3. Using international study to broaden student mindset; 7.4.3 Opportunities and expectations).

- Opportunities for international students to mingle or develop meaningful relationships were limited or diminished. Motivational and positional agency were important for students whose outlooks were shaped depending on responses or interactions from the various situations they encountered (See: 7.4.3 Opportunities and expectations)

- Key characteristics of global citizenship are lacking from Irish higher education, and this reflects Ireland's capability to responsively act in this area. This means that students must explore options or rely on personal endeavours to enhance their own global citizenship (See: 6.4.3.3 Experiencing Ireland in a 'year abroad' setting; 7.4.3 Opportunities and expectations).

Examples of student experiences could be representative of learning for global citizenship. However, experiences were unplanned and ad-hoc, so they can only be seen as outcomes from students' actions and responses. Ultimately, the presence of global citizenship can be seen through the students' actions, and not as a result of the host nation or the universities active attempts to harness or hone global citizenship.

8.1.3 In what ways can increased awareness of the needs and demands of international students impact the development of Ireland's international education environment, and can Ireland's own social and historical experiences lend to this learning process?

A gap between the expectations of international students and the Ireland's educational policy is quite evident from analysis in this research. Ireland attempts to replicate objectives of major internationalisation providers through its policies. Reasons for choosing overseas study appear poorly understood, as are the characteristics of the students who choose this direction, and communication between both parties seems to be absent. This represents a significant failing by authorities as the students who choose Irish education appear unacknowledged.

- Participants spoke frequently of situations where Irish students avoided establishing friendships, so the responsibility of building closer networks rested with international students. In several instances, the students were left to feel that they were not part of the class. Due to the prevalence of this it can be asserted that this exists as a cultural issue in Irish universities (See: 6.6.3.4 Student expectations, demands, and workloads; 7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks; 7.6.2.2 Difficulties establishing connections)
- Students raised a range of areas which cause studying to be difficult, but are not addressed and some are even ignored. These important areas address deficit approaches to working with international students who are often made to feel that they have a different status to domestic students (See: 7.6.3.1 Proud to be a student; 7.6.5 Agency, belonging, and student experience).
- A majority of students typically had no family or close friends to fall back on, which placed them in a weak social position where their ability or willingness to cope is diminished. Many faced interactions with fellow students from Ireland which resulted in some feeling isolated (6.6.1 New students and new relationships – undergraduate social networks; 6.6.1.1 Developing student

identities – undergraduate experiences; 7.6.1 Relationships with their institution; 7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks).

- Many students were left to fend for themselves, and the Irish system appears unresponsive and passive to the challenges they face. Internationally focused education requires clearer communication for transmitting understanding of the various needs and focuses of its stakeholders. Students must be included in these discussions. (See: 6.6.1.2 Social groups and student interactions; 7.6.3.1 Impact of experiences on outlooks)
- Language was not seen or expressed as a major problem, but a willingness to engage with students according to their need would be seen as welcomed. Areas which it was felt required support included:
    - Applying for internships, jobs or similar which had a bearing on their student outcomes (See: 6.5.3 Accessing work opportunities and internships).
    - Offering opportunities to make friends and develop lasting relationships (See: 6.6.2.1 Creative responses to building connections; 6.6.2.4 Student expectations, demands, and workloads; 7.6.2.2 Difficulties establishing connections)
- Communicating with and learning from students does not appear to be a priority for government or institutions. There were few mentions of services which help international students feel more like students in their universities, and little was said of opportunities to share experiences directly with fellow students or staff. It appears that the main method of knowledge gathering came from *studentsurvey.ie*, which has significant limitations (See: 7.6.4 Limitations of Student Experience)

As student difficulties do not appear to be appropriately addressed, this questions how the students are perceived by policy makers. Given that students are frequently discussed in data sets and as a collective and indistinct population, a sense prevails that they are disvalued. In addition, there are few if any suggestions in participant responses that Ireland regards its historical relationships as relevant

to its approaches to internationalisation. As a result, students who study in Ireland are left to comprehend their place within a globalised education industry.

8.2 Evidence of changed or transformed perspectives and practices for the universities

Many thousands of international students chose to study in Ireland, and especially in its universities. Several established institutions were founded when the state was still young, so their values and development have replicated the advancement of the Irish state. As international students contribute to the changing demographics in Ireland, a cultural and geographic response needs to be integrated. Ireland and its universities can begin this process by focusing less on economic growth, and more on educational enhancement.

A cultural and geographic response is relevant as it acknowledges Ireland's unique status. Not only has Ireland learned to speak English, it has also grown from a remarkably impoverished and under-developed past. It's location within the EU and with a small global educational footprint, especially compared with other English speaking countries, suggests that changing direction is a realistic option. Dabiri (2021) notes that by setting a new agenda based on cultural and geographic features, older concepts and ideas which were divisory in their creation and implementation must be abolished. Internationalisation approaches which prioritise accruing capital and prestige must be scrapped, and resources must be provided to drive the necessary cultural changes in Irish campuses.

8.2.1 Platform to communicate shared interests

A facility to directly communicate with international students and involve them as partners in their educational process is necessary for Irish HEIs. Agency has been shown as a constant and integral factor, and by providing international students the setting to address issues and consider solutions will allow for agency to be utilised effectively for the benefit of fellow students. There is a strong need for a facility to amplify the voice of students, as the participants were shown to talk openly on topics which impacted their lived experiences. It appears indispensable to establish a means to frequently talk of and share how studying in Ireland impacts individuals.

Ongoing conversations which critically discuss the lived experiences of students have numerous potential outcomes. International students are often seen by faculty and administrative staff as passive. Tran and Vu (2018) highlight the problems with many forms of research on international students which apply a deficit approach to understanding student experiences. This means that problems resulting from international students are given priority, and this focuses on the students' actions in seemingly hostile settings. Contrary to this, results for this research indicate that solutions do not lie in preparing students to cope in Irish higher education. Instead, Irish higher education requires significant overhaul to its international education offering to accommodate an active and engaged student group who are keen to grow as individuals in Ireland.

This research project is an important prototype for understanding how regular listening can be facilitated. At the outset, little was understood of the outlooks of international students in Ireland, and interviews focused on learning about how students experienced Irish higher education. Results could then be interpreted to build an appreciation of how students coped. Uncovering agency from this process suggests internationalisation approaches require a paradigmatic shift to begin to cognate the extent of interacting circumstances which determine the lives of students in Ireland. Providing ongoing opportunities to learn from students sharing their stories and offering suitable and accessible platforms which can allow for shared approaches to the many situations faced by students is a realisable target.

8.2.2 Meaningful supports which matter to students.

Through conversations and listening, more can be understood about international students. Conversations can lead to wider comprehension of the need for supports and responsive care necessary for international students, which can be furthered through enhancing or facilitating agency in the many forms it takes. Examples of possible support may relate to job and internship application support, training of faculty and administration of student needs, and mentoring of newly arrived students. These supports may be available, however from interviews they went unmentioned, while the wider policy approaches failed to include any indications that programmes should be in place.

Should strategies continue to prioritise internationalisation, direct consultation with international students on relevant issues is necessary. A clear discrepancy is the absence of a facility for direct communication between students and their host institution. Better communication and sharing of best practice within individual HEIs appeared to be absent considering the wide range of experiences and practices. Positive actions in individual cases aside, the Irish government failed to allow for effective and constructive interactions, leaving universities to respond based on immigration requirements. Even when there was some early activity or events to engage with students, these became less frequent as students were left to themselves. A method of communicating with international students appears to have been absent. International education strategy can show greater leadership. With support from government and other hierarchies, backing for programmes to support cultural and professional development can be attainable. Additional advantages include the ability to collect and monitor extant data on student experiences in Ireland, which may guide policy outcomes and future strategies. The wider purpose would see Irish internationalisation collecting substantial evidence on the successes and failures of its international education approach, which could be fed upwards to other policy makers.

Students would gain much benefit from this approach. The intersectionality of research participants lives detailed in the interviews offers essential knowledge to all invested in internationalisation in higher education. Intersectionality refers to the multiple cultural and positional influences which determine the experience and is especially relevant to international students who can be marginalised or discriminated against. Intersectionality was not directly explored for this pjofect, but further research could benefit students and offers a promising future direction. This research highlights that agency in motivational, positional, and dispositional forms reflects myriad ways that being a student in Ireland can be experienced and can complement and highlight the presence of intersectionality.

8.3 Impact on personal practice

My research addresses prominent assumptions and activities involving international students in Ireland, and provides an alternative voice which elaborates on student

experiences. It explores and analyses students lived experiences, and this is directed by their storied responses as they studied in Irish universities. The research shows that students from China are a diverse cohort who seek new opportunities through learning, a sense of belonging, and independence. To achieve this, students relied on their individual agency to drive them to achieve their ambitions. As a professional working directly with international students I must face this new understanding to support students to take advantage of their learning settings.

Students' outlooks matter, and ways in which students can be facilitated towards realising what is of importance to them must be a priority. They choose to study in Ireland for reasons that are wide ranging and specific. By recognising the influence of student agency, perceptions are challenged because this calls into question the efficacy of processes and policies already in place. The active and engaged nature of international students are fundamental to their personal and learning successes. My research confirms the need for responsive attitudes and systems to take charge and make changes.

The role of language in Irish internationalisation has been confirmed as problematic. As an English speaking country, the state is attempting to replicate major providers of international education without acknowledging Irish educational values or the history of education in the country. Language is manipulated by global powers as a tool for influencing and dictating social, economic, and political factors, and education is an important tool for achieving this. Ireland also attempts to exert economic and political gains from its internationalisation approaches, which represents an attempt to manoeuvre the country's higher education to be considered amongst the elite of international education. However, Irish policy on internationalisation has experienced little critical analysis, and studies which approach the experiences of students do so only partially. I have looked to address these limitations in research on international students in Ireland, and this has resulted in a new mindset in my practice.

My practice required new understanding and ideas to bolster the ways which the experiences of students are comprehended and shared. In classrooms, teachers learn of the ups and downs of students' lives while studying overseas, but there are

few ways to share these to effect change. Policy seems to ignore that the students are individuals who make choices to come and study in Ireland, but who can struggle with a difficult and unwelcoming university culture. In my research, I have removed barriers which have previously limited the communication of student experiences and the results are distinct. I heard from students who spoke of being ignored and made to feel unwelcome, or students who shared different worldviews which they were criticised for. I spoke with students who were unable to comprehend systems and processes yet found little support to navigate them. In all situations, students were left to feel devalued and deficient. These students felt hurt and misunderstood, but there was seemingly no means for expressing this beyond their own friendship networks. However, my research shows that students expressed greater desires and intentions than the objectives of policies and universities, and this motivated students towards success. By learning that multiple factors influence students' decisions to study in Ireland, I can assert that individual experiences are clearly of more importance than predetermined outcomes set by policy authors. These results justify my reasons for commencing this research, and they also reinforces my long-standing professionally held belief that international students are dynamic and driven individuals.

My research explains to fellow practitioners and policy makers that there is a detrimental cultural element in Irish higher education. Students in this environment are frequently unsure of how to respond or cope in these settings. Relief from the challenges occasionally came from the shared humanity of individuals who took the time to listen. Most of all, it was the students' agency which drove them to resolve the challenges as they impacted them, and this understanding is crucial to the outcomes of this research. Should future internationalisation approaches continue to seek more students, bridging the cultural gap must focus on decentring Irish higher education so an equitable learning experience can be fostered. Forming a system which truly acknowledges and places the emphasis on the international in internationalisation must be the next direction.

8.4 Contribution to knowledge and future implications

My research shows international students from China to be conscientious and diligent participants in their studies in Ireland. Prior to this, research has avoided examining the lives of students from China in this depth, so students have been hindered from sharing their stories and experiences directly. I have directly engaged with Chinese students and have asked them to tell me their stories and their experiences as a student in Ireland. By retelling their experiences as new arrivals to Irish higher education, student participants address highly relevant issues which explore the backgrounds to their decisions to study in Ireland, and also discuss in detail their lived reality as a student with their host university. Furthermore, as Irish HEIs and government policy seek to attract more students from China and other countries, research which addresses students' concerns and experiences in Ireland carries added importance. To enhance Ireland's provision of international education, research must address the experiences from the perspective of students from China, and other major nationalities. As a practitioner and a researcher with international students, I emphasise that this must be prioritised in the future, and my research acts as a ground stone for future studies in this area.

Researching has revealed the diversity of backgrounds and motivations for study within the Chinese student body in Ireland. Few students are attracted or impelled to study in Ireland for the same reasons. The analysis shows that coming to Ireland for study was the culmination of a detailed and complex process which involved family, friends, former teachers, and even previous visits to Ireland. Indeed, these close networks were key to assisting the decisions, and this was just in the beginning of the students' educational journey. Across my research, many assumptions from policy makers, universities, and students go unchallenged as those involved stepped away from resolving or addressing discrepancies. It is clear that communication falters within the Irish higher education landscape, and largely it is the students from overseas who struggle most. In the future, research and policy must accept and engage with international students to understand the

deeper and complex issues which impact them. The population of international students is a vibrant and distinct cohort with much to learn from, and understanding more can enhance higher education in Ireland.

Agency emerged from my research as a critical component in the experiences of international students in Irish universities. My analysis explores and shows how students are directed by both their own agency and their agentive responses to many incidents which occur. This has not be addressed satisfactorily in previous research on Chinese students or other nationalities studying in Ireland. As discussed extensively, positional, motivational, and dispositional forms of agency help students to succeed in their settings, such as intentionally using international study to become or realise themselves as more independent. They respond to challenges and focus on objectives, as happens when attempting to foster meaningful and transferable experiences. Students show initiative and act purposefully, which includes attempts to develop a meaningful bond with their host university. All examples in my research are indicative of the complexity and vibrancy which agency facilitates in students' educational and personal growth in Irish universities. More importantly, the research celebrates the students who study in Ireland, and remove notions of deficiency which are common in analyses of International students, and especially those from China.

I have expounded through this research that there is an urgency and necessity to continue engaging openly with students from China and other regions prioritised by Irish policy. Future research must open up to alternative paradigms which elicit a clear picture of internationalisation in Ireland. The students must be centred in research which addresses the impact of internationalisation and other strategies which aim to attract more students from overseas. My research has shown the value of involving students as integral and active participants, and my study acts as a positive model which can be replicated. Culture within Irish higher education must be re-visioned if internationalisation is to be successful, and discussing and understanding is a vital step in comprehending the ways which culture matters. If Ireland is to accommodate international students, this requires a mindset and approach with students at the centre.

8.5 Future research

The analysis of students and their developing outlooks in Irish higher education has uncovered many themes and concepts which have previously gone unnoticed. Further research in this area would allow for extensive understanding of ireland's growing footprint.

1. Conduct similar research with students from different cultural groups, such as students from Africa, European Union, and Middle East. This would be of benefit as it would give a firmer understanding of how other large population groups experienced Irish education.
2. Data was collected at the outset and during the Covid-19 pandemic. While this research did not focus on this aspect, a relevant study of students during this time would be of significant value to Irish higher education.
3. Develop professional elements through wider discussions involving Irish students, university faculty, and international students in collective discussion.
4. There is a strong need to research the extended lived experience of a students as they progress through their degree, from beginning through to graduation. This research would involve fostering strong relationships with students, but also provide a unique insight into life of an individual who has chosen to study in Ireland.
5. Return to the research with a chosen group of participants a number of years after graduation. This would give a wider picture of the influence of Irish higher education on students' lives, and it may offer a unique opportunity for students to reflect on their educational experiences and their participation in research.

8.6. Concluding remarks

Irish higher education finds itself in a unique position. The opportunity to revise and refocus Irish internationalisation strategy is present following completion of two previous policy cycles. The strategies drove notable increases in international

students, but now an opportunity to revision the purpose and intent of international education has emerged. The focus of research presents vital input in the discussions which surround internationalisation. Students must be given greater consideration, as their means of interacting and developing are given inadequate prioritisation. They have shown that they are active and considerate participants in their education, and approaches must consider accommodating international students as a national priority. As Irish higher education attempts to situate itself within global hierarchies, space and time exists to revision higher education culture on campuses and create a dynamic and empowering student centred learning centrepiece.

Appendices

Appendix A – Ethical approval permission

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

20/01/2020

Dear Conor O'Reilly

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Project Title: The Outlooks of International Students when Immersed in an Irish Higher Educational Setting

Application No: 400190004

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: _20/01/2020_____
- Project end date: _____01/06/2022____
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf) (Unless there is an agreed exemption to this, noted here).
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used:
  https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston
College Ethics Officer

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Appendix B – Plain language statement to recruit research participants

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: The Outlooks of International Students when Immersed in an Irish Higher Educational Setting

Researcher: Conor O'Reilly

You are being invited to take part in a research study. It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

The reason for this research is to build an understanding of how international students living in Ireland feel they are developing while living and studying in Ireland. Through talking to and listening to the experiences and opinions of students who have come to Ireland to study, this research will allow for a clear image of the personal and educational development of students from overseas in Ireland.

There are no expected risks attached to this research. Involvement in this research means I shall carry out three interviews spread over one academic year. Each interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes, and but in some cases it may last longer. If an interview takes longer than one hour, it will be stopped immediately.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to take part. If at any stage you wish to withdraw as a participant in this research, you may do so immediately, and your responses shall be treated as you feel appropriate. It should be noted that there may be no direct benefits to you as a participant in this research.

Data Protection

The protection of your personal information is highly important and protecting it is my first priority. All information collected shall be kept in digital format only, and will be only accessible by me on a secure desktop computer.

1

I will assign you a non-identifiable alias, and every effort will be made to remove details from the study which may identify you to potential readers. Examples of this information include home city, family member names, schools or teachers, employers or activities, or mentors.

All files relating to the interview containing sensitive information, such as transcripts, information on aliases, and any other personal details, will be saved in a secure password protected folder. I will be the only person who can access this folder.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Usage of Data

Your experiences as an international student in Ireland are an exceptional source of information. The interview data will be analysed to find and examine different themes in the lived experiences of international students living in Ireland. This research will give a more clear image of what international students experience and how their outlooks change while studying in higher education in Ireland.

The completed research will be presented within a Doctor of Education dissertation which will critically assess the experiences of international students in Ireland. This data can also be published and presented in important academic publications and conferences following the completion of the dissertation. Research data can be kept for up to 10 years, in accordance with University of Glasgow research code of practice. All stored data will be kept anonymous and depersonalised.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by Maynooth University

This project is not supported or funded by any organisations or funding bodies.

For further information or to pursue a complaint, please contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Muir Houston (Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

This project has been considered by the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences College Research Ethics Committee, and approval was granted on 20/1/2022

Appendix C – Letter of consent to Interview

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: The Outlooks of International Students when Immersed in an Irish Higher Educational Setting

Name of Researcher: Conor O'Reilly
Name of Supervisor: Prof. Stephen McKinney

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I understand that the research shall include a 40-60 minute interview. This interview is the third in a series of three (3 of 3). Each interview will take place at different stages in the academic year.

I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded and this information will be stored in a secure location.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym, and when possible all personal and identifying information shall be made anonymous.

- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Appendix D – Interview questions for data collection

Interview 1: Why do international students choose to come to Ireland, and how do their experiences meet with their expectations?

1. What is your understanding of the term 'international student'?
2. Why is studying overseas such an important choice for students from your country these days?
3. Can you tell me about your original decision to study overseas?
4. What or who were the original influences which helped you to decide to study overseas?
   - Can you describe any of these as positive or negative? Please explain why.
5. What were the most important factors when choosing a destination to study overseas? How does Ireland or your university meet these criteria?
6. Why did you decide to study in Ireland?
   - What do you hope to achieve by coming to Ireland to study, and how can studying in Ireland help you to achieve that?
7. Can you tell me about your overall experience in Ireland since arriving here (Interviewer will clarify 'overall experience' as social, educational, and personal experiences if participant is unclear of meaning)
8. Can you tell me of some of the situations where you were at a disadvantage or you benefitted from since you arrived in Ireland?
9. What do you think will be most difficult aspect of living and studying in Ireland, and how might this change your outlook towards the future?
   - What do you think will be one of the greatest benefits of studying in Ireland, and how might this change your outlook towards the future?
10. Overall, how do you feel about being a university student in Ireland, and how will it help you meet your aspirations or future goals?

Interview 2: How is the Irish government's intention to develop 'global citizens' compatible with international students educational objectives? Is the learning and experience relevant to the students' aspirations?

Since we last met, is there anything you wish to talk about before we commence the interview?

1. Can you tell me about your experiences, in education and day-to-day living and socialising, since you arrived here?
2. Can you discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living and studying in Ireland so far?
3. How do you feel you are adopting to living and studying in Ireland?
4. In what ways do you feel you have or developed as a person? How has this happened?
5. How prepared were you for the past few months of study and living in Ireland? Could you have approached this differently?
6. Much of Ireland's recruitment of international students talks about developing 'global citizens'. What do you think a global citizen is? Is this related to your own goals?
7. What is the connection between being an international student and a global citizen? Has this affected your experiences as a learner here?
8. Which experiences and aspects of your study in Ireland do feel will be most beneficial in the future when you have completed your studies in Ireland?
9. How do you feel you are valued as a member of the educational community here in Ireland? What does this mean to you as a student?
10. Overall, how did you feel about being a university student in Ireland, and how will it help you meet your aspirations or future goals?

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