

Some thoughts on the first year of Disney's collaboration with the Centre for Academic Achievement at UL.

Stephen Kinsella

Primary school children aged 8-12 years from disadvantaged areas of Limerick attended fun personal enrichment courses at the Centre for Academic Achievement (CAA) in the University of Limerick.

"you have changed my life"- Azeezah

The CAA provides academic after school courses to children including this term the subjects 'animation' 'experimental science', and 'zoology'. The courses this spring took place over 6 Wednesday afternoons in the Kemmy Business school in UL, with 69 school children taking part. These children were identified by their teachers who were anxious to encourage them to develop their academic talents. Before this course many of these students would not have thought of attending university as an option for their future, but now they are much more confident in their abilities to achieve to their potential. With the support of the Walt Disney Company this project hopes to encourage these students to fulfil their potential, and continue on to be successful in both second and third level education. This programme is run by the Dept. of Economics in the Kemmy Business School in conjunction with the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland at Dublin City University.

Theory, Design, and Objectives

The theory behind the Centre for Academic Achievement is very different from the standard theory underpinning the state's role in education. The standard theory we teach undergraduate economists says the state should educate everyone to a certain level because the returns to society of everyone being able to read, write, do basic mathematics, understand history and geography, and so forth, are much higher than if only those who could afford to educate their children received such a basic level of training. A society of people where a large fraction can't read the directions on a medicine bottle is not going to be very coherent or developed.

The course 'was fun and I learnt a lot, I would love to come back again'
Robin, student on the medicine course

The theory behind the CAA is something different. It says that households who don't have locally accessible exemplars of success, generally don't even know they are capable of

more¹. The CAA's objective is to operationalize Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's *Capability Approach* for the disadvantaged children of Limerick.

What have you learned during these classes?

"You can make stuff real"- Ryan, Animation

Our idea is change students' functioning, agency, their capabilities. Sen's central capabilities are: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's environment. Each of the CAA's courses is designed to further many of these central capabilities. We aim to provide educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged areas both inside and outside the school environment.



Figure 1. Some of the amazing CAA students.

Our ambition is not limited to the disadvantaged students chosen by school principals and their teachers. Our ambition is to enrich the curriculum of primary school students by providing an opportunity for them to access subjects ordinarily only available at third level

¹ See Walker and Underhalter, eds., *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, Palgrave, 2007.

courses like animation with award-winning company Brown Bag Films, medicine, ergonomics and design, how to make an app, chemistry, and engineering.

“It is wonderful that the children get the opportunity to experience what life would be like attending U. L. as it gives them something to aim for in the years ahead”

- Bernice O’Connell (Principal, Galvone National School, Kennedy Park, Limerick)

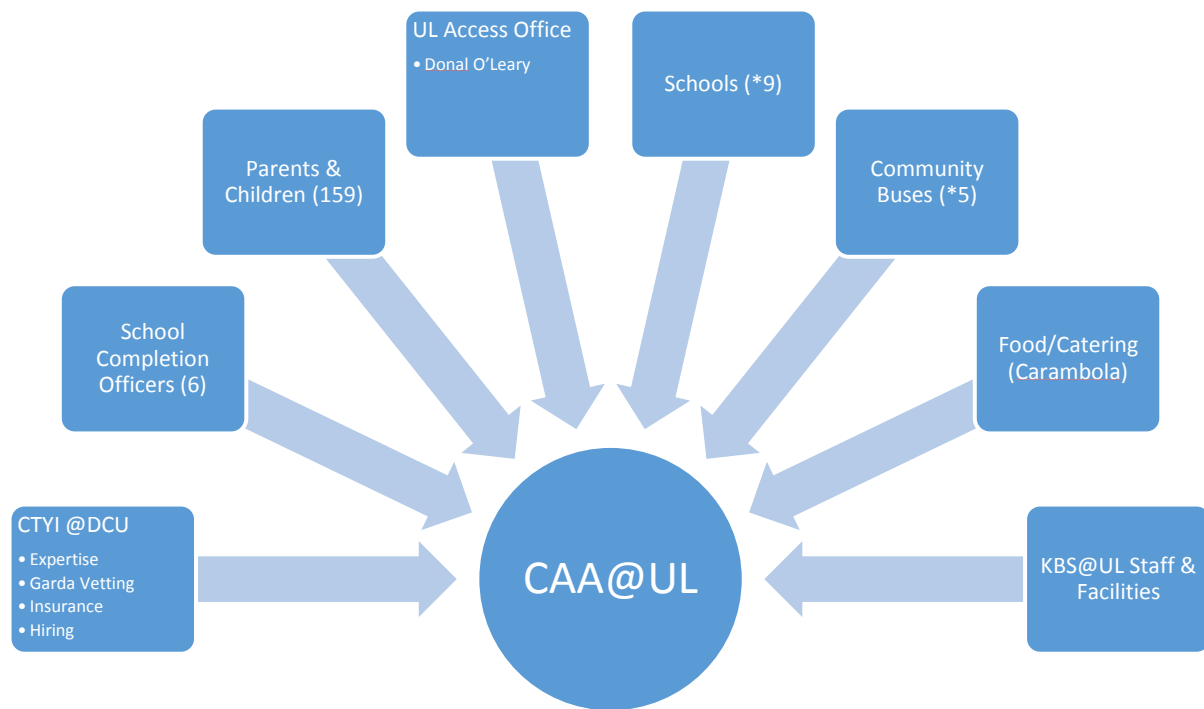
A key objective is to give these students the opportunity to access their local university and its world class facilities. We promote positive attitudes to creativity, science, and education in the community, as well as encouraging support from the parents and family of our students. The programme concludes with a Graduation Ceremony at the end of each term and family members are strongly encouraged to attend. Our first graduation speech from Disney VP Trish Long is attached.

“I have little doubt that this opportunity gives our pupils confidence for the future and experience of the type of work done in 3rd level”

Michael Ryan (Principal, Our Lady Queen of Peace National School, Limerick)

Structure

The structure of the programme is complex, because the needs of the students are complex. In addition to developing engaging academic content with excellent lecturers, we have to solve logistical problems like transportation from the schools, ensure child safety at all times, to gaining the trust of the local schools, to dealing with issues of food poverty, to organising key events like the graduation and liaising with schools and school completion officers. Our key stake holders are shown below.



Evaluation

Given that this work is funded externally, we place a strong emphasis on evaluating pre/post session effects and their costs.

The table below shows the proportion of each cohort answering yes to the question ‘do you want to go to university?’. In each case the entire cohort answered a paper survey at the very start and very end of the programme.

	Number of Children	Start: Week 1	End: Week 6
Autumn Semester 1 2013	53	20%	70%
Spring Semester 1 2014	47	24%	76%
Spring Semester 2 2014	59	27%	88%
Autumn Semester 1 2014	53	22%	78%
Spring Semester 1 2015	69	76%	86%

The results are striking for two reasons. First the clear effect of the programme, and second, the change in the first semester of 2015, when our relationship with Disney began, particularly after the graduation. There are clear spillovers from previous cohorts, and this, I think, shows the very positive effect we are having within the schools, particularly as a

result of the graduation. The informal feedback we are getting is overwhelmingly positive, with schools now working with us to recruit next semester's students much earlier.

Why did you enjoy these classes?

"because we do different things every day!"- Anaya

"I like this class and I would like to go again next year!"- Irene

For me as one of the originators of the project, what is remarkable is the change in the last, and largest, cohort of students—they came in with much higher expectations than previous cohorts, most likely as a result of the information that now percolates through the schools and the graduation ceremony from the previous year. Informal feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and schools now working with us to recruit next semester's students much earlier. This is a sign, at least to me, that the capability levels in the general population of students we are targeting is increasing. I look forward to the next cohort to confirm this.



Figure 2 The Graduation, with Disney VP Trish Long's Keynote. The Dean of the Kemmy Business School, Dr. Philip O'Regan attended.

Smaller things are really helping, too. For example, we make sure to take a ‘class’ picture per school, and send the school that picture of their successful students, which helps lionize the individuals and their achievements, but also helps them understand that this programme is now a part of their institutional setting, and something other students can aspire to be a part of.

‘It was enjoyable because we had a laugh and did work at the same time’
Beth, student Investigative science course

Brown Bag Films

The students found teach of the courses stimulating, and chief among these was the Animation course, designed and delivered by the award-winning Brown Bag films.



Figure 3. Animation in Progress!

The course was custom-designed by Brown Bag films and was by far the most popular and positively received course from the last semester. The course emphasized creativity, collaboration and design, and ended with a film each of the students can be both proud of and which shows their creative senses, imagination, thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over their environment—all capabilities Amartya Sen deems it necessary for a fully functioning person.

Concluding Thoughts: The Future

We look forward to the next semester with a mix of curiosity and pride in the way this programme is running. Each person involved in designing the course is responsible for getting us to this point. The programme is stable, we have earned the schools' trust, and our next graduation ceremony will be a day of celebration I am looking forward to immensely.