

Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020



**Ireland's
Education
Yearbook** 2020

Editor **Dr Brian Mooney**

Contents

PUBLISHED BY
EDUCATION MATTERS

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ISBN: 978-0-9956987-4-1

SPONSORED BY

Trinity College Dublin - Irish Research Council
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Copy-edited by Stan Carey
www.stancairey.com

Designed by Jeroen Bos
www.artvaark-design.ie

Printed in Ireland by
Walsh Colour Print
Castleisland, Co. Kerry

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Editorial

A year like no other

It will be many years henceforth before we can discern the full impact of Covid-19 and how it transformed the ways education was both delivered and consumed throughout every sector, from early childhood to fourth-level research.

Measures that were introduced overnight after the 12 March closure of all educational institutions, and that were developed and refined in the weeks and months afterwards, have given rise to outcomes which in many cases may outlive the distribution of vaccines in 2021 and beyond.

When Phyllis Mitchell and I sat down in the days prior to the national lockdown in March to plan how this yearbook would set about capturing this once-in-a-century event in the world of education, we realised that this would be the most important edition we were ever likely to publish, given the probable transformative nature of what was about to occur. And so it has proved to be.

I wish to commend the more than seventy authors who have chronicled the educational highlights in their sector over the past year, and I hope that you, our readers in print and online, will enjoy reading their insights on what occurred and its importance for education and society in Ireland.

They have more than fulfilled our expectations and hopes in capturing the essence of this unique year. In doing so they have also distilled, with great clarity, the learning arising from the changes necessitated by Covid-19, which we can apply now and into the future to our lifelong education system.

Early childhood, primary, post-primary

For parents who are front-line workers in vital services and who worked throughout the entire period of this pandemic, the closure of schools and preschools created a crisis. How could they continue to work when their young children were now at home? Due to Covid-19 restrictions and the requirement to avoid mixing households, using grandparents as substitute childminders was out of the question. Unlike in the UK and Northern Ireland, no provision was made to keep schools and childminding facilities open to cater for the children of essential workers.

It was also realised at an early stage that given the private-sector nature of early childhood provision, the sector would collapse completely unless the State stepped in with a substantial package to keep preschool education on life support.



Dr Brian Mooney
Editor, Ireland's
Education Yearbook

Hopefully, as a society we will have learnt how vital this sector is to the efficient functioning of our economy and society. We must commit to provide it, now and into the future, with the level of State support to enable it to retain highly qualified staff, who are now being educated to the highest international level in our universities and institutes of technology, but who are being paid minimum wages in many cases.

We also need to be mindful of the observation made by Professor Mathias Urban that it is not sufficient to regard this sector as a glorified babysitting service: instead we must ensure that the highest standards of early childhood education are delivered to Ireland's children under five years old. These formative years are by far the most important in shaping our educational expectations and horizons. We need to become far more mindful of that reality when determining the allocation of funding in the education budget.

The publication this year of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which will transform how our junior infants to sixth-class students are taught, may in fact facilitate the adoption of a far more streamlined approach in educating our children as they progress from the early childhood Aistear programme, through the new Primary curriculum, on to the Framework for Junior Cycle at second level.

The response of our primary, second-level, further, and higher education sectors to the fallout from the decisions taken on 12 March has been nothing short of heroic. Teachers, principals, lecturers, and all those involved in delivering education plunged into an unknown world with energy and enthusiasm. They learnt new skills in online delivery and in many cases upgraded their home IT facilities to enable themselves to continue to support their students from home.

The normal parameters of their professional lives were upended. They found themselves working on a 24/7, always-on basis. In my role as chair of a number of institutions, I heard at first hand from teacher representatives of the emails from students landing at 2 a.m., followed by queries at 9 a.m. the same morning as to why the teacher or lecturer had not responded.

Second-level teachers found themselves determining their sixth-year students' educational outcomes through assessed grades. Given that teachers had to determine an exact order of attainment in their Leaving Cert class group, where no two students could be awarded the same percentage score, they were put in an almost impossible situation.

It transpired, when all the results were collated, that there was a 10 per cent overall increase in the grades attained on higher level papers and a 250 per cent increase at H1 level. To ensure fairness, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) adjusted the assessed grades downwards, following in all cases the ranking order of the teacher in question, to reduce the grade inflation in this year's results. This process as adopted by the DES is currently under appeal through the courts.

What is abundantly clear at this stage is that there is total determination among all involved in education that the Leaving Cert will operate in the normal way, as far as possible, in 2021.

Third level, FET, and research

What is also clear is that there have been very positive outcomes from the online delivery of course work in further and higher education. Will we ever again be able to justify filling lecture theatres with 500 students to listen to a talking head for an hour?

Colleges have noticed that attrition rates dropped considerably following the 12 March shutdown. In some cases, students who had disengaged from programmes before then re-engaged and successfully completed their courses working exclusively from home. We need to reflect on how we can bank the benefits of online delivery of aspects of our post-second-level education system to maximise student engagement and commitment to completing their programme.

On the negative side, there has been a noted increase in the levels of mental health distress arising from the enforced isolation of students from their peers through adherence to Covid-19 guidelines. Research in our university sector identified a marked increase in students who indicated suicidal thoughts in the past year. This is a hugely important issue which we need to address immediately to ensure the mental well-being of our young people.

I cannot complete my reflections on 2020 in the world of Irish Education without acknowledging the profound nature of the decision by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin to establish the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I believe that in the future this decision will be seen to have had a transformative effect on our lifelong educational system.

Bringing together all aspects of tertiary education under the remit of a single minister of cabinet level will enable Ireland to ensure that our young people leaving full-time second-level education will have a world-class education system available to them. Obviously, we are going to have to ensure that the appropriate levels of investment at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels are forthcoming.

We also need to ensure that our research funding focus is not directed solely at meeting the needs of existing employers. The future success of Ireland and its people depends on its ability to innovate and create new knowledge, which will seed the new jobs of the future. Peter Brown, in his overview of the research landscape in Ireland, makes the case for funding all aspects of research in all disciplines.

As we reflect on what we have endured in 2020 as a nation and as a community, I think that we can be immensely proud of how we have worked together to sustain all aspects of our society. I believe that our education system will emerge far stronger than it would have if Covid-19 had not occurred. We have learnt to innovate in all aspects of our lives in a highly creative manner, and logjams in our education system that might have taken years to unblock under normal circumstances have been swept aside overnight.

Let us now look forward to 2021 with hope and enthusiasm as we build on the learning of the past year, and redouble our commitment to build a lifelong education and training system which will be the envy of the world.

Introduction

2020 was a year of dramatic and unprecedented challenges for our country, Europe, and the world as a whole. It required rapid responses and innovation in public policy in every area, including our education system. When our schools and colleges were forced to close in March, it brought home to everybody just how important they are to our society. Just as importantly, the reopening of our schools in September was a critical moment, bringing a new hope.

Dealing with the pandemic will continue to be a major concern until an effective vaccine has been widely administered, but I think it is important to note the work of the partners in education during 2020 in cooperating to overcome so many hurdles. I also want to acknowledge the work of Minister Norma Foley and her officials during the intense and highly pressured summer months to put in place one of the most effective back-to-school programmes in Europe.

Hopefully 2021 will be a year when we can give our absolute attention to the many other urgent and important challenges which our country faces. This said, it is important to recognise that 2020 was a year when we put in place the foundations for a new era in Irish education – including the most significant ever restructuring of how government oversees education policy.

Policy and progress

I believe passionately that education is the most important part of building a strong society and an economy which can provide for all of our people. While many policies have played a role, a core fact remains in relation to Ireland's progress: every major advance secured by our country in the past sixty years has been enabled by the sustained expansion in participation and achievement in education.

As we look at the challenging reality of the modern economy and social developments, I believe that education will actually be even more important to us in the future. The challenge for us is to create a new agenda.

Yes, the resourcing of core functions and the spread of institutions will always have to be addressed, but they cannot be allowed to be the only areas of concern. Far more than before, we have to be more challenging of our policies. We have to move faster, address obvious gaps, and be more strategic.

Vision of Ireland's Future through Investment in Education



Micheál Martin
Taoiseach

Short-term changes and chasing after passing fads can do great damage in education – and consistency can be a great strength. However, we simply have to embrace the idea of a steady evolution in our policies rather than keep to a model which can too often wait for once-in-a-generation change.

This is what lies behind the major structural reforms we implemented when forming the new government, and it is what will drive our agenda in the coming years. The creation of a separate government department with responsibility for higher education, further education, and research puts a radical new emphasis on a vital and dynamic sector. Less discussed is the fact that it also creates the space for the Department of Education to be more active and innovative in its work at first and second levels.

The over one million pupils and staff in our schools represent the largest and most complex public activity we undertake. We can never succeed by just focusing on aggregates – we have to respond to the unique needs of individuals. In fact, a lot of the progress which our schools have delivered in the past two decades has been based on embracing new programmes which are far more tailored to the needs of specific pupils.

A series of early-school-leaving measures helped Ireland reach one of the highest school-completion levels in Europe through tailored programmes and offering different pathways for pupils within the same schools. Twenty-five years ago, we had little special education provision in our mainstream schools and no expert provision for many children with particular special needs. Today, special educational provision is part of the work of every school.

Future development

It's progress like this that we now have to build on. Even in the midst of responding to the pandemic, important first steps have been taken by the government to show our intention to support and develop our schools. The reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio, the increase of devolved funding for school capital projects, and the restoration of dedicated guidance and counselling provision have been provided for – as has the expansion of a range of special education supports.

What I want to see in the coming years is for us to continue to expand support for initiatives which will allow schools to help each child develop their potential. Literacy has to be a priority, and we must renew our approach to helping schools which serve communities with significant levels of educational disadvantage. But we must also be open to innovation and to addressing clear challenges faced by our country.

We need to introduce a full national scheme for teaching European languages in our primary schools. We have to build on early steps to give every child access to music and cultural activities in school.

We've known for many years that the Leaving Certificate is often too inflexible, and it uses a very limited range of methods for learning assessment. This became even clearer during 2020 when, with no notice

“ We can never succeed by just focusing on aggregates – we have to respond to the unique needs of individuals.”

and with great pressure on everyone, a new system had to be put in place. Given the threat of possible future pandemics or other events which could disrupt exams, we obviously need to develop a more permanent backstop – but equally we need to learn as much as possible from this experience and see how we could do things differently.

Most countries in Europe have in place a mixed approach to assessment at school-leaving stage, and we need to seriously engage with the potential benefits of this for Ireland. Ways where we can do more to encourage independent thinking and creativity must be considered.

Structure and strategy

The reformed Department of Education has a strong voice in government, and it has more space now to push forward what is still a challenging agenda. The creation of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is a major departure for public policy, and it is an even stronger signal of our belief in the role that knowledge will play in shaping Ireland's future. The Department covers areas which have grown dramatically and dynamically in recent decades yet have rarely been the focus of public debate.

There has been a lot of attention placed on creating institutions but very little on their role and quality. It's time for a new, more active and strategic approach. We need to do much more to value the vital role played by further education both economically and socially. Apprenticeships and similar qualifications deserve a renewed level of respect and priority – and we need a new impetus behind supporting a culture of lifelong learning.

“ We've known for many years that the Leaving Certificate is often too inflexible, and it uses a very limited range of methods for learning assessment.

As our higher education sector has grown and become more diverse, the need for us to be clear in what we are aiming for has become more urgent. We have to make sure that our institutions offer students programmes at high international standards, are financially stable, and respond to the social and economic needs of today. This is an area which will be addressed in detail early in 2021.

Research

As for research, the simple fact is that many of the jobs in our country today would not exist without the investment in advanced research which began in 1997. From a position where Ireland was at the bottom of nearly every international ranking in research, we advanced to a leading position in key areas. For example, we now have one of the world's leading centres for immunology research – a critical area as we work to tackle this and future pandemics.

However, we have become overly prescriptive in some areas, and we need to build a broader culture of research. We have to support both applied research and the basic, frontiers work which is essential to developing cutting-edge ideas and people.

Just as importantly, we have to have credible paths for support for individual researchers and smaller research groups outside of core national priorities. Of course, we also have to recognise that a strong culture of research requires diversity, and that our country needs cutting-edge work in the humanities and social sciences at the same time as in the sciences.

Finally, we have not yet really cracked the link between higher education and the research needs of Irish companies. In an era of Brexit and uncertain trading conditions, we have to be able to diversify and innovate more than in the past. The strength shown by our existing research-intensive industries needs to be extended in many more sectors.

This is a broad and an urgent agenda for the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It is a central part of the new government's determination to place the ideas of education, skills development, and research as the drivers of our country's future.

First-ever Woman President of an Irish University



In September 2020, Professor Kerstin Mey assumed her role as Interim President of the University of Limerick, the first ever woman President of an Irish University. Prof Mey replaced the outgoing President Dr Des Fitzgerald, who had previously announced his intention to retire.

Kerstin Mey was born in East Berlin, Germany. She studied for an MA equivalent in Art, and German language and literature, at Humboldt University of Berlin and obtained a PhD in Art Theory and Aesthetics there. She held academic positions in universities in Germany and the UK. Before she joined the University of Limerick as Vice President Academic Affairs and Student Engagement, she held responsibilities as Pro-Vice Chancellor and Dean of the Westminster School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster, UK.

Over the past 30 years, Professor Mey has built a record of accomplishment in successfully initiating and implementing pioneering academic and research initiatives and cultural projects in higher education. As an experienced leader and senior manager, she has led major infrastructure and culture change programmes and set up a range of strategic external partnerships.

Higher education has been undergoing transformation everywhere. The three main sources of transformation are the embedding of information technology in learning processes; ever-increasing mobility of people around the planet for education and work; and the importance of university research for economic growth.

This is my last year as Provost of Trinity College Dublin. I was elected in 2011 by academic staff and student representatives, and I'll step down in September 2021. It's been an extraordinary decade to be at the helm of a great university – bookended by global recession and Covid-19. I've found it always challenging, often exhilarating, and ultimately rewarding.

As Provost, there's always a huge amount to get done. Universities today have big agendas – they're drivers of economic growth as well as instigators of critical ideas about societal development. Here, in Ireland's Education Yearbook, I'd like to focus on achievement in education, which is so critical to the research/teaching nexus.

Globally, higher education has been undergoing transformation for well over a decade. I see three main sources of transformation: the embedding of information technology in learning processes; the ever-increasing mobility of people around the planet for education and work; and the importance of university research for economic growth.

Every university has to reckon with, and embrace, these ongoing changes. To do this in Trinity, we took cross-cutting action:

- We created an Office of Global Relations, with a remit to increase our numbers of international students, global academic partnerships, and student exchanges, while ensuring that our campus be a diverse, welcoming place to people of all cultures.¹
- We launched a Strategy for Innovation and Entrepreneurship,² which integrated innovation into the core mission of teaching and research and later led to the manifesto for creating a new Innovation Campus at Grand Canal Dock.³
- We delivered the most far-ranging renewal of the undergraduate curriculum in a century.⁴

Change is the Only Constant

Universities are changing everywhere and in many ways



Patrick Prendergast
Provost and President,
Trinity College Dublin

Curriculum

Curriculum renewal began with a seemingly simple but essential exercise: defining intention. What should a Trinity education achieve? After consulting with the whole college community – including academic staff, the Students Union, graduates, guidance counsellors, industry partners, and employers – we agreed a set of graduate attributes that encapsulate the skills and qualities we'd like students to develop so as to manage complex life challenges in changing environments and contribute effectively to their professions and communities. These attributes are as follows:

- Firstly, we want our graduates to think independently – not easy in an age of incessant media and marketing campaigns designed specifically to prevent it, but more vital than ever.
- Secondly, our graduates should communicate effectively to diverse audiences through different media – orally, in writing, online and in person, through different languages, visually, graphically, and on social media.
- Thirdly, our graduates should have the skills to develop continuously through life – they should leave Trinity with a love of learning, recognising that their education is only starting.
- The final attribute concerns how our graduates should act in the world: we would like them to act responsibly to themselves, their fellow citizens, the environment, and ultimately as active participants in democratic society.

In order to embed these attributes through the redesigned curriculum, we put emphasis on *doing*, not *telling* – on giving students more independence and responsibility.

“ Trinity electives and open modules expose students to ways of thinking outside their core disciplines.”

The new curriculum disconnects entry routes from exit routes, enabling undergraduates to combine subjects and select learning pathways. It makes open modules available to all students (except in the Faculty of Health Sciences), and, in perhaps the most far-reaching development, it introduces electives in areas of research strength. There are thirty-nine Trinity electives with titles like Latin; One Language, Many Cultures; Toolkit for a Smart and Sustainable World; and Vaccines: Friend or Foe?⁵

Trinity electives and open modules expose students to ways of thinking outside their core disciplines, which helps build understanding that complex issues yield to a diversity of approaches. This complements deep immersion in a chosen field of study – it is through researching a capstone project related to their core discipline that our students 'see' the frontiers of knowledge.⁶

Global

Since 2011, Trinity has more than doubled its number of non-EU students and almost doubled the number of international research collaborations.

We now have dual education programmes with the University of Singapore, Thapar University in India, and Columbia University in New York, which means that, for instance, students can spend two years in Trinity and two

in Columbia, graduating with degrees from both universities. This type of programme is much deeper in scope than traditional student exchanges, involving not the swapping or exchanging of modules but a root-and-branch redesign of whole curricula.

We've also strengthened our connection with global alumni. Trinity has 120,000 graduates living in over 140 countries worldwide. When we began to continuously engage with them – through social media and physical visits to alumni branches in our trips worldwide – we discovered just how much they value their connection to Trinity. I found it moving to discover graduates in far-flung places, who might not have returned to Ireland in decades, meeting up every few months.

Our alumni are willing to serve as ambassadors for the university by promoting Trinity to friends and colleagues; they help foster global academic and industry partnerships and provide philanthropic support. They mentor our students and provide internships. We have redefined the Trinity community to include alumni alongside students and staff.

There is indeed such a thing as a global citizen, and we should find no contradiction between that and national or local loyalties. We stand with the great European humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, who never went further north than London nor further south than Geneva: 'Ego mundi civis esse cupio' – 'I long to be a citizen of the world'.

Innovation

Everybody knows that taking on leadership roles outside the classroom helps to develop the graduate attributes. In recent years we've put particular emphasis on fostering entrepreneurship and innovation as a way to create positive change in the world.

Our student accelerator programme, LaunchBox, provides student teams with incubation space, funding, and mentoring to develop their business ideas. It has proved to be transformative, supporting 80 start-ups and over 200 students since its establishment in 2013. These start-ups have gone on to raise over €69 million in funding and investment, creating over 200 jobs in the Irish economy.

Engaging in innovation and entrepreneurship develops the graduate attributes and strengthens the connectivity between them. 'Thinking independently' is where original ideas come from – students then learn to act on their ideas and communicate them to investors and through marketing. Every year, a high number of LaunchBox projects are social enterprises – for some students, entrepreneurship is about finding pragmatic solutions to environmental or societal challenges: the very essence of 'acting responsibly'.

Inclusivity

We can't ask students to 'ask responsibly' if the college leadership isn't taking steps to combat societal inequality. If universities only enrol

students coming from certain communities, regions, and schools, then they will only get conformity on campus – conformity of social background and conformity of thought. How can students learn to 'think independently' if their environment does not expose them to different experiences and mindsets?

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) is increasingly recognised as a global success story. Our numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds coming to college through TAP's alternative entry routes has increased eightfold since 2000. In recent years, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge have launched pilot schemes for a foundation year directly modelled on that of TAP.

Another initiative to value diversity is around Entrance Exhibitionerships, which reward the academic achievement of undergraduate entrants to Trinity. Traditionally, students with the highest CAO points in the country became Entrance Exhibitioners – often they all came from a handful of secondary schools. We've now changed the criteria to award students who gain the highest points in their schools – if you're best in your school, you're a trailblazer. This simple change amplified diversity: we now have Entrance Exhibitioners from hundreds of schools spread throughout all thirty-two counties.

Future

These are some of the initiatives we've taken over the past decade to develop and renew the Trinity education. I'm proud of all we've achieved.

We've created an environment that is more global and entrepreneurial, more diverse and flexible. I hope we're preparing students better for twenty-first-century lives, without losing sight of what has made the Trinity education so distinctive over four centuries.

I believe that the changes we've made have helped prepare us to weather the current shock of pandemic and lockdown. Like all universities, we're finding it difficult. The challenges of keeping our community and city safe, while delivering an education that is transformative for each student, are not easily reconciled. Much that is essential in the Trinity education suffers when students can't meet in person with each other and with their professors.

But we've developed the tools and mindset to get through this. I was delighted at how well our LaunchBox teams survived lockdown and not meeting together in person. They transitioned smoothly to online, and a month ago the ten finalised teams presented to judges with projects that were as strong as ever. We look forward to LaunchBox continuing online this year.

Articulating our values has helped us cleave to them. Trinity is the only university in Ireland not to have shut down the Erasmus programme this academic year. We're leaving it up to individual students to assess the risk and take responsibility for themselves and their learning. This is about us keeping faith with the graduate attributes. Learning a new language and culture is key to 'communicating effectively', and how can we expect

“ Since 2011, Trinity has more than doubled its number of non-EU students and almost doubled the number of international research collaborations. ”

“ The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) is increasingly recognised as a global success story. ”

students to learn to ‘think independently’ and ‘act responsibly’ if we tell them what to do, without giving them choice or agency in their own lives?

This points to a wider truth, which is that all our initiatives are about imbuing students with the resilience and creativity they will need to adapt to change and withstand adversity. I believe our approach will stand to our students, during the current pandemic and throughout lives that will be independent, communicative, adaptive, and responsible.

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Kevin Fraser and Linda Ryan of the EDGE programme receive the 2019 Engineering Education Award from Hilary O'Meara, Accenture.

EDGE is Marie Skłodowska-Curie COFUND Action, led by Trinity College Dublin on behalf of 10 academic institutions from across Ireland.

Early Childhood ¹

When Covid-19 hit Ireland in March 2020 and early childhood services were forced to close, Valerie Gaynor and staff at Creative Kids & Co set about adapting their outdoor space and their practice in preparation for re-opening. Situated in Assumption Primary School in Walkinstown, Dublin, Creative Kids opened up during summer 2020 to offer preschool provision with a larger than usual outdoor dimension to keep everyone safe.



Common Good and Public Service

Crisis lessons for the future of early childhood education and care



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2020 has seen the convergence of long-looming crises for early childhood education and care, culminating in large-scale disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article takes stock and argues that urgent lessons from the crises should – and can – be learned now. The stay-calm-and-carry-on approach is no longer an option. Instead, the crises have opened up an immediate opportunity to initiate fundamental reform.

The reason life is so strange is that we have simply no idea what is around the next corner, something most of us have learned to forget.

–Colum McCann, Zoli

Unprecedented but not unpredicted

In the competition for a motto for 2020, the insight that life is unpredictable though we tend to pretend otherwise, expressed by the Roma woman Zoli in Colum McCann's novel, is a strong contender. It has been an extraordinary year. Future analysts and historians may well point to 2020 as the turning point that finally ended the certainties of modernity that defined so much of the twentieth century.

Globally unfolding events since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have been called 'unprecedented'. The term may be overused, but we are clearly entering an era where our blueprints, derived from past experience, no longer offer reliable guidance for humanity on a finite planet. The picture is one of converging existential crises – pandemic, climate, economy, democracy – that reinforce each other, making it difficult if not impossible to identify a credible starting point for developing 'solutions'.

Edgar Morin, in his *Manifesto for a New Millennium*, points to the general messiness of the situation humanity finds itself in:

One is at loss to single out a number one problem to which all others would be subordinated. There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem. (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 74)

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in many countries, including Ireland, has been affected by this convergence of crises. Young children and their families are often the most

vulnerable population (Blofield & Filgueira, 2020) and are likely to become the silent long-term sufferers of this crisis (UNICEF, 2020). The pandemic has compounded existing inequalities and created new ones, not least due to unequal access to vital public services.

In 2020 Ireland found out the hard way that early childhood education and care is an essential part of a nation's critical infrastructure. Its disruption has far-reaching consequences, first and foremost for young children and their families, but ultimately for the entire society and economy. As early childhood services had to close due to the pandemic, children were deprived of stimulating learning opportunities, safe spaces outside the home, and in some cases a daily nutritious meal. Families were left without reliable childcare, making it difficult or impossible to work. Key workers, such as those in the health and retail sectors, were prevented from fulfilling their frontline roles.

Early childhood educators, many already in precarious employment, faced losing their livelihoods. As spring progressed it became increasingly doubtful whether early childhood services would be able to reopen, due to a collapse of their business model. Without unprecedented state intervention in the sector, the restart of the economy would have been put in jeopardy. Facing the crisis, countries are engaging in what could be called an 'experiment by nature and design' on a global scale (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

“ In 2020 Ireland found out the hard way that early childhood education and care is an essential part of a nation's critical infrastructure. ”

Approaching a review of ECEC in Ireland in 2020 solely through the lens of Covid-19, tempting as it might be, would risk losing sight of other critical developments that have shaped the sector. For a fuller picture we must return to 2019 and include other events that coincided with the efforts to sustain early childhood services during lockdown. Despite the intersolidarity of crises and converging uncontrolled processes, the picture is also one of hope and potential.

ECEC is characterised by extraordinary commitment to and engagement with young children and their rights, displayed on a daily basis, individually and collectively. It is important to recognise this, because it is the force that will make necessary reform of the system successful. Any critical interrogation of the systemic failures of the Irish ECEC system has to start by acknowledging the enormous personal and institutional commitment to young children and their right to education and care. Pointing out, as internal and external observers have consistently done, that the system continues to fail children, families, educators, and society is not an exercise in blame. It is, in reference to Bruno Latour (2004), a 'matter of fact' that should urgently become a 'matter of concern' for us all.

Crisis? What crisis?

ECEC in Ireland was not in a good state before Covid-19. 2019 was a remarkable year. Following the launch of *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* (DCYA, 2018) in November 2018, 2019 was the first year that saw ECEC embedded in a wide-ranging and ambitious ten-year strategy. *First 5* in itself is an important achievement, as it opens the possibility of creating a coherent vision for

the ECEC system and consequently a roadmap for realising it. With *First 5*, Ireland now has a chance to catch up with a globally emerging 'systemic turn' (Urban et al., 2018) that has led countries and international organisations increasingly to adopt integrated policy frameworks for addressing early childhood development, education, and care. This shift is manifest in the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) and in recommendations adopted by the leaders of the Group of 20 (G20) that refer to policy briefs developed by the Early Childhood Research Centre at DCU, in collaboration with a global network of early childhood research and policy centres:

Strengthen G20 commitment to advancing access to locally and culturally appropriate quality Early Childhood Development (ECD)/ Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all children from birth, and build international consensus on government responsibility for a 'whole systems' approach to ECD/ECEC policies. (Think20, 2019, p. 4)

Welcome and necessary as it is in its ambition, *First 5* also shines a light on the state of the early childhood profession in Ireland. As I pointed out in Ireland's *Yearbook of Education 2019–2020* (Urban, 2019), the renaming of the field as *Early Learning and Care* (ELC) without any meaningful consultation sets Ireland at odds with the hard-won international consensus on a shared understanding of *Early Childhood Education and Care*.¹

“ The profession's inability to agree on a shared collective identity, and the absence of an autonomous professional body, exacerbate the weakness of the field. ”

That it could be introduced top-down, at a crucial moment for the Irish early childhood system, without much resistance, reflects the profession's inability to agree on a shared collective identity, and the absence of an autonomous professional body, which exacerbates the weakness of the field. As I wrote in 2019: 'ECEC in Ireland has yet to become "a profession thinking and speaking for itself" (Urban and Dalli, 2012). Unlike other established professions, we are still spoken to, and critical decisions are made for us, not with us' (Urban, 2019, p. 96).

Other critical incidents for Irish ECEC have cast their shadows over the year to date:

- the scandal of child maltreatment and professional malpractice, exacerbated by insufficient response by the inspectorate, that once again had to be revealed by investigative journalism
- the existential threat to early childhood services caused by an unsustainable insurance model and the absence of state-supported indemnity
- the continued scandal of precarious employment for the majority of early childhood educators, leading to unsustainable staff turnover rates and endangering the well-being of children.

These are some examples of how convergent crises that, once they enter the public consciousness, open the possibility for change. Arguably, ECEC entered public consciousness – or at least the news cycle – on 5 February 2020, when several thousand early childhood educators and parents from across Ireland joined a large protest march in Dublin. Organised by a

coalition of early childhood organisations (Together for Early Years²), the march was a powerful show of hands for better working conditions and appropriate public funding.³

However, public attention soon turned to a very specific crisis when, on 12 March, then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the immediate closure of all ‘childcare facilities’, amidst a general closure of schools, third-level education, and a range of public facilities and institutions. It then became apparent, literally overnight, that ECEC is indeed a vital public service, whose absence had wide-ranging implications for the entire country.

What have we learned (if anything)?

As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded in spring 2020, much effort had to be put into ensuring the survival of the early childhood system during the immediate lockdown, and to enable its safe reopening. Once again, the unsustainable model of relying on a largely private sector to provide an essential public service, common good, and children’s right had been exposed. Unprecedented state intervention was demanded and provided.

In a parallel development, the three political parties that would eventually form a new coalition government – Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, The Greens – negotiated and agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) that had to meet two competing challenges: responding to the immediate crisis while setting out a viable plan for ‘Our Shared Future’.⁴ Early childhood occupies a prominent place in the PfG, although mostly in relation to ‘childcare’ (mentioned thirty-one times) and its affordability for parents. ‘Early education’ is mentioned only twice (it also appears in the heading ‘Early years education and affordable childcare’). First, the Programme states:

For providers, we recognise the value of Early Education and Childcare for children and we will introduce a long-term sustainable funding model that promotes quality, better outcomes for children and makes a career in childcare more attractive. (PfG, p. 80)

This seems a strange prioritisation to me, placing the value to providers before children’s rights. It adds to the impression that the PfG understands values first and foremost in the monetary sense.

The second time ‘early education’ features in the text is in a pledge to implement the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to ‘help children with additional needs to access early education and care settings’ (p. 81). This is clearly not a programme that prioritises children’s universal right to early childhood education! It is left to the reader to work their way to item three in a list of twelve bullet points under the heading ‘Early years education and affordable childcare’. Only here do we find what should have been spelled out as the overall and urgent task for the new government:

Reform the childcare system to create one that brings together the best of community and private childcare provision, is focused on children’s

“ **The unsustainable model of relying on a largely private sector to provide an essential public service, common good, and children’s right had been exposed.** ”

“ **Essential elements of a Competent System include at the very least an autonomous professional body, and an integrated, whole-system monitoring, evaluation, and research structure.** ”

rights and quality outcomes, reduces inequalities, supports staff retention, and substantially reduces costs to parents. (PfG, p. 80)

A commitment to overdue reform is welcome. The terminology, however, is concerning. While across Europe and more widely, countries and international organisations recognise the importance of an integrated ECEC system,⁵ with education as a universal right of young children, and a value of its own, the Irish government seems to be embarking on a largely utilitarian route. Framing the purpose of the early childhood system largely as childcare, Ireland appears to be disassociating itself from the global consensus. Moreover, prioritising childcare over education risks deepening the conceptual split between them and exacerbating its damaging effect on the Irish early childhood system.

The PfG contains twelve specific commitments covering a range of issues, including the establishment of a single government agency, Childcare Ireland, tasked with developing and assuring ‘quality’ over further investment to ‘reduce costs for parents’ through ‘universal and targeted subsidies’, and measures to improve ‘terms and conditions of employment’.

It is a highly aspirational programme that links with Goal D of First 5, to establish ‘an Effective Early Childhood System’ (DCYA, 2018, pp. 104–115).

Potential stepping-stones to this effective system are the announcement of Childcare Ireland as a one-stop-shop for developing and assuring quality, and government support for the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the childcare sector. Both are potentially important elements of what could eventually become a Competent System (Urban & Guevara, 2019; Urban et al., 2012) of ECEC in Ireland.

‘Potentially’, because other essential elements of a Competent System are still missing. They include at the very least an autonomous professional body for early childhood education and care (whose absence is at least noted in First 5) and an integrated, whole-system monitoring, evaluation, and research structure (First 5 aspires to establish a research observatory, which could become a central element of such a structure).

While it is welcome to see children’s rights mentioned as one element of the new government’s commitment to early childhood provision, the overall impression is one of lack of political will to address the underlying challenges of ECEC in Ireland that have consistently been pointed out by Irish and international observers over three decades:

- governance
- fragmentation
- resources
- marketisation.⁶

Unfortunately, as far as ECEC is concerned, the PfG is a missed opportunity. It is a programme for system repair, at risk of perpetuating the piecemeal approach to early childhood policy, not a much-needed programme for system change.

There are other indicators that make me question the political will to embark on a fundamental change of approach. Announced in the context of *First 5*, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2018 established two working groups: the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) Steering Group and the Funding Model Expert Group. Their terms of reference predate the pandemic. Neither group was given a remit to address the systemic challenges; their work to date has stayed firmly within the limitations of the existing early childhood provision.

Even before Covid-19 it was questionable, at best, to insist on the separation of the two groups and their agendas and work plans. As a member of the WDP Steering Group, I requested a joint meeting and an alignment of work plans from the outset, a request repeatedly rejected by the Department. Only recently was it indicated that direct communication between the two groups might be arranged, when they resumed their work after the disruption. The pandemic did not cause the dysfunction of the Irish ECEC system; it has brought it into focus. It should now be a priority to revise the working groups' terms of reference and explicitly include *system change* in their remits.

Looking forward: A necessary and possible transition

There can be no return to normal because 'normal' was the problem in the first place⁷

When the contours of the new government began to emerge earlier this year, INFORM, a group of senior independent experts, of which I am a member, produced an analysis of the early childhood system and laid out arguments for fundamental reform supported by a roadmap and concrete steps.⁸ Our vision for the Irish ECEC system is one that is *universal, public, and free at the point of delivery* – in line with the EU's Child Guarantee.⁹

“ The pandemic did not cause the dysfunction of the Irish ECEC system; it has brought it into focus.

Most importantly, it is based on children's rights to education from birth as spelled out in General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2006). Our arguments and proposals focus on what we believe should have been at the core of the PFG: a bold initiative and political leadership aimed at transitioning the Irish ECEC system to one that is effective and competent, as envisaged in *First 5*.

In our contribution we lay out three commitments that we believe should have been at the core of the PFG:

1. a commitment to a universal, public, rights-based ECEC system
2. a commitment to introducing the core constituting elements of such a system over the lifetime of the new government
3. a commitment to immediate measures to begin and sustain the transition.

We cannot pretend that, on any scale, we can return to carrying on as if nothing has changed. The past year has made that abundantly clear. The

status quo ante is gone. Besides, as the graffiti sprayer in Hong Kong reminds us, it was the problem in the first place. Differently put, by Pope Francis in his recent papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality' (Francis I, 2020).

In 2020, ECEC in Ireland has finally arrived a crossroads. The policy choices made today will determine if we, as a country, will have to continue with a patched-up, dysfunctional system, or instead seize the opportunity to realise something better, more equitable and sustainable, and fundamentally different.

“ The crisis gives us an opportunity to stop, take stock, re-evaluate, and redesign how we provide early childhood education and care in this country.

I use the phrase 'seize the opportunity' because that is precisely what the crisis gives us: an opportunity to stop, take stock, re-evaluate, and redesign how we provide early childhood education and care in this country. There are obvious structural elements that need to be looked at: some existing ones will have to be scrapped, new ones put in place. All have been emphasised by experts for years. They include:

- public policy and resourcing, under the auspices of one government department, which draws directly on the expertise of professionals across all ECEC setting types
- support structures at local level, to lead and enable joint planning, accessible professional development, and opportunities for sharing learning
- provision to be based on local community needs, defined through mandatory participatory short-, medium-, and long-term planning
- an active, cohesive monitoring, evaluation, and research system that sets standards and systematically documents and investigates perspectives of all stakeholders, including children, families, and educators, and replaces the current differentiated inspection regimes
- an autonomous, inclusive professional body to regulate and represent the ECEC workforce, responsible for professional conduct and ethics, overseeing training, qualifications, and continuous professional development, in collaboration with relevant local and national organisations.

System change is possible – beginning now

While these and other elements are indispensable, system change is not a solely structural task. To suggest so would reduce to a technical and managerial task what is fundamentally a political, ethical, and democratic project. Before we can meaningfully address structural questions about service provision and governance, we have to engage with a more far-reaching question: What do we, as a society in the twenty-first century, aspire to for *all* children?

This is a question of values, ethical stances, and most of all vision. A central point of critique of the Irish early childhood system has been the absence of a shared vision amidst the multitude of fragmented views and vested interests within and around ECEC. Ireland has shown remarkable capability

for social transformation in recent years, unimaginable not too long ago, in areas such as women's reproductive rights and marriage equality. These changes were achieved through broad and informed democratic debate and political leadership. It is about time we applied these capabilities to the education and care of the youngest children.

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1. The OECD (2001) provides this internationally adopted definition: 'Early childhood education and care refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the EU. It includes centre and family day-care, privately and publicly funded provision, pre-school and pre-primary provision.'
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3. www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/0205/1113244-childcare-funding/.
4. <https://static.rasset.ie/documents/news/2020/06/programmeforgovernment-june2020-final.pdf>.
5. As we have documented elsewhere, there is a significant trend to integrate systems even further and to move towards integrated early childhood development, education, and care (Urban & Guevara, 2019).
6. European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2004; for more detailed discussion see Urban et al., 2017.
7. Graffiti in Hong Kong. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/coronavirus-who-will-be-winners-and-losers-in-new-world-order.
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Progress Report for First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for babies, young children and their families



In November 2020, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, published the Government's First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2019.

First 5, the ten-year Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019–2028), focuses on early childhood from the antenatal period to age five, and takes a joined-up, cross-government approach to supporting babies, young children and their families during these critical early years.

The First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2019 summarises the progress in implementing the strategy, with over 90% of all 2019 commitments met at this point.

This chapter explores the interface between the draft primary curriculum framework for primary schools and curricular provision for preschool education, most notably Aistear. It argues that the redeveloped curriculum provides an opportunity to forge enhanced levels of continuity and coherence in the learning experiences of young children.

Introduction

Processes of curriculum review and redevelopment are integral to education systems to ensure coherence between educational programmes in schools, evolving educational understandings, and societal values and expectations. Since the advent of political independence a hundred years ago, there have been three substantive curriculum changes in primary schools: in 1922/1926, in 1971 (the 'New' curriculum), and in 1999 (the 'Revised' curriculum). These curricula encapsulated and reflected the pedagogical understandings, concepts of children, and societal standards of their respective eras. Guidance on content and pedagogies for pupils in the infant classes (pupils aged four to seven, generally) were integral to these curricula.

Exciting work is currently under way, led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), on redeveloping the 1999 curriculum. This has already resulted in the publication in February 2020 of a *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation* (NCCA, 2020), and it is intended that the redeveloped curriculum will be introduced in all primary schools from the mid-2020s. The purpose of this article is to explore the interface between the draft primary curriculum framework for primary schools and curricular provision for preschool education, most notably Aistear.

Curriculum provision for young children in Ireland

Before exploring the vision, content, and pedagogies of the recently published redeveloped curriculum framework, it is important to contextualise curricular provision for preschool education in Ireland. Historically, the State has been notable by its absence in the provision of childcare or preschool education, leading to the development of provisions among private, community, and voluntary providers (Coolahan et al., 2017). The infant classes of primary schools, which have traditionally catered for children aged four and upwards, were the key State provision for young children.

The Redeveloped Primary School Curriculum

An opportunity for continuity and coherence in early childhood education



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In the past two decades, however, there have been enhanced levels of State involvement and support for the care and education of preschool children, including the universal provision of up to two years of 'free' preschool (three hours a day for thirty-eight weeks a year) under the ECCE Scheme since 2016 (Walsh, 2016). Until the publication of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) for children from birth to six years of age, there was no national guidance on curriculum for preschool children. Aistear and Siolta (the National Quality Framework) were merged in the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide in 2015 (NCCA, 2015). Preschool settings participating in the ECCE Scheme are obliged to adhere to the principles of Aistear and Siolta when planning their educational programmes (DCYA, 2019).

As a consequence, many pupils attending the infant classes of primary school now and in the future will have experienced up to two years of preschool education, which was not accounted for when the 1999 curriculum was being devised. In the past decade, children's educational experiences in many infant classes have been increasingly informed by Aistear, with a greater emphasis on play-based approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, the recent Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA,

2019) incorporates a strong emphasis on play and playful approaches in every outcome for the infant classes. However, there is scope to further clarify the interface between Aistear and the primary school curriculum and to support its implementation (French, 2013). This reality makes the decision to redevelop the primary school curriculum a welcome and timely initiative, wherein issues of alignment and coherence with provisions at preschool must be to the fore of considerations.

“ The decision to redevelop the primary school curriculum is a welcome and timely initiative.

The redeveloped curriculum framework

The publication of the draft primary curriculum framework in 2020 (NCCA, 2020) marks the culmination of a range of research publications, consultations with a wide variety of partners and stakeholders through curriculum seminars and online fora, and engagement with teachers and principals through the Schools' Forum¹. One of the key reports in this regard related to the structure and time allocation in a redeveloped curriculum. The consultation underpinning this report favoured a more cohesive approach between the preschool years and the infant classes to support continuity of learning for young children, as well as a more integrated or thematic approach to learning in the infant classes (NCCA, 2018a). In terms of the Schools' Forum, it is heartening that a number of preschools are participating in and contributing to this work to ensure that cognisance is taken of children's learning and development before they attend primary school.

The draft primary curriculum framework is infused with many of the principles of Aistear, including teacher and child agency, flexibility for local adaptation in line with school needs and contexts, and learning through play, exploration, experimentation, and inquiry. Moreover, there are strong resonances between the two documents' visions for the child as a unique, capable and caring individual. Transitions and continuity between preschool, primary, and post-primary schooling are a central principle of

the redeveloped curriculum, facilitating smooth transitions for the learning journeys of children throughout their educational experience. This aligns well with the NCCA work on preschool to primary school transitions using the *Mo Scéal* documentation as a context for communication and dialogue between professionals, families, and children (NCCA, 2018b).

Similarly to Aistear, the redeveloped primary school curriculum will focus not only on knowledge and skills but also on developing children's dispositions, values, and attitudes through seven broad-based competencies which will be embedded across the curriculum outcomes. For the first four years of primary schooling (junior infants to second class), there will be a focus on integrated and thematic learning across a range of curriculum areas, providing for a continuum of experiences from preschool to primary school, which is subsequently built on within subjects from third to sixth class.

Once the draft curriculum framework is finalised at the end of the current consultative period, this document will then be used to develop a curriculum specification for each curriculum area or subject. These specifications will be similar to the format of Aistear and the subjects for post-primary Junior Cycle, as well as the new languages and Mathematics curricula at primary level, providing the broad direction of travel but allowing freedom and flexibility to teachers to frame contextually appropriate learning content, pedagogies, and assessment practices.

Conclusion

The current redevelopment process and the initial outcomes bode well for a primary school curriculum that respects, learns from, and builds on children's successes and learning in preschool settings. Early indications are that supportive pedagogical considerations and values from Aistear are being infused upwards to the primary school, informing the pedagogical provisions and interactions in the infant classes of primary schools. The enhanced levels of synchronisation in curricula should create a context for increased dialogue and sharing among early years professionals and primary school teachers to support continuity of learning for young children. This should provide for smoother transitions for young children entering the infant classes, enabling the framing of more contextually responsive learning experiences and pedagogies.

Aistear was the first curriculum framework introduced in the Irish context, and the shift in culture from a prescribed curriculum to a more loosely defined curriculum framework, now also proposed for the redeveloped primary school curriculum, should not be underestimated. Frameworks require higher levels of engagement from early years professionals and teachers as 'curriculum makers' (Priestley and Philippou, 2018) at a school level rather than as 'implementers' of prescribed content. The 'framework' style has arguably proved challenging for early years professionals, infant class teachers, and indeed post-primary Junior Cycle teachers. Sustained support for 'sense-making' (Pietarinen et al., 2017) at both individual and collective level must become a feature of the enactment of the redeveloped curriculum, supporting the agency of teachers and schools to make contextually appropriate and informed content and pedagogical decisions.

Transitions and continuity between preschool, primary, and post-primary schooling are a central principle of the redeveloped curriculum.

On the positive side, the learning experiences for all young children will be guided by curricular frameworks (Aistear and the redeveloped primary curriculum framework), providing for more flexibility, agency, and responsive pedagogies. Perhaps this is the next step on Ireland's journey towards a composite curriculum framework to inform all aspects of learning and development, such as the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2009) for three- to eighteen-year-olds that has been developed in Scotland.

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ENDNOTES

1. The NCCA established a Schools' Forum consisting of sixty primary schools, post-primary schools, and preschools from across the country, representing the rich diversity of school contexts in Ireland. Teachers and practitioners meet every four to six weeks to guide and help shape the primary curriculum review and redevelopment. See: <https://ncca.ie/en/primary/primary-developments/consultation-on-the-draft-primary-curriculum-framework/schools-forum>.

Early Childhood Education and Care professionals in Ireland have been coping with an onslaught of policy implementation, poor pay, and precarious working conditions, coupled with a lack of recognition as a profession. In February 2020 they took to the streets of Dublin in protest. Then the pandemic closed down services, leaving them in an even more precarious position. Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland (MECPI) surveyed members of its community to examine the effects of lockdown on an already stressed profession.

Introduction

Since 2014, warnings have been issued about the impact of financial instability and precarious working conditions on the mental health and well-being of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector (Matson & Bowers, 2014). It is of growing concern that ECEC professionals, and in turn children in their care, may be exposed to a looming mental health and well-being crisis. The RTÉ *Prime Time* exposés in 2013 and 2019 showed the impact on children when the financial instability, precarious working conditions, and mental health and well-being of the professionals who care for them are left unchecked and unsupported.

Between 2018 and 2019 the sector saw an employee turnover rate of 23% (Pobal, 2019), and in February 2020, 30,000 ECEC professionals took to the streets of Dublin calling for investment, recognition, and better working conditions. A predominantly young female profession is currently living and working in precarious conditions. This raises the question: What about the children in their care? Many instances of professional love (Page, 2017) are observed in Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland's (MECPI)' community of practice as professionals put children's needs above their own. But this cannot be sustained. We know that children's development is significantly influenced by quality interactions with their educators in ECEC (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). What happens to children when ECEC professionals break under the pressures of precarious working conditions?

Since 2013, as administrators of MECPI, we have observed and grown concerned about the levels of stress, issues of mental health and well-being, and financial poverty experienced by ECEC professionals. In March 2020, the country went into lockdown as a result of Covid-19. We decided, as part of a wider longitudinal project,

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on ECEC Professionals

How Lockdown Affected a Cohort Already at Breaking Point



Sinéad Matson
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Education and Care
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to disseminate one survey within the community of practice to examine the impact of the pandemic on the lived experiences of ECEC professionals before, during, and after lockdown. 615 members responded, representing every county in the Republic of Ireland. In this article we offer the responses and voices of ECEC employees.

Finances and mental health

426 respondents identified as being employed in an ECEC service. 98% identified as female, with the largest cohort aged 25–34 years. After the Covid lockdown, there was a substantial drop (14%) in full-time employment, and 10% said they were no longer working. Part-time and sessional employment remained somewhat unchanged, but there was a noticeable drop in the hourly rate earned post-lockdown. The number of employees earning minimum wage (€10.10 an hour) rose to nearly 20%.

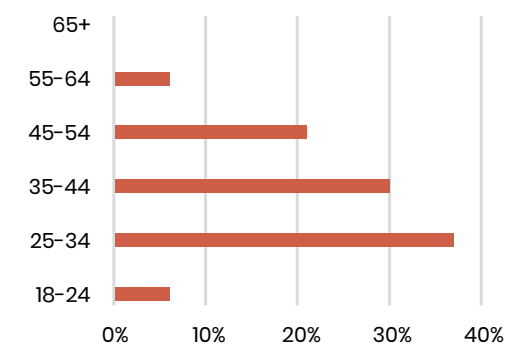


Figure 1: Age range of employees

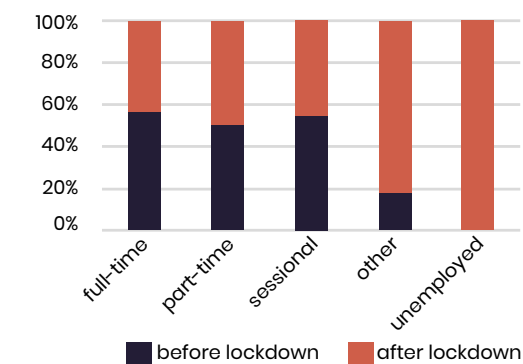


Figure 2: Employment status before and after lockdown

“ A predominantly young female profession is currently living and working in precarious conditions.

When asked to indicate their financial status before lockdown, 43% of employees said they could not afford unexpected financial expenses, and 7% said they were living on the poverty line. After lockdown, 53% of employees said they could not afford unexpected expenses, and 14% said they were living on the poverty line. A number of respondents named pay rates as a contributing factor to poor mental health and well-being:

“I have a level 8 degree and I’m coming into my 5th year of working in the same crèche, and I’m now making less money than I did when I started. It has severely impacted my mental health, and I’m considering leaving the profession.”

When asked to rate their mental health and well-being before the lockdown, 46% of employees said it was positive, and 23% said it was very positive. After lockdown, 29% said their mental health and well-being was negative, and only 19% said it was positive.

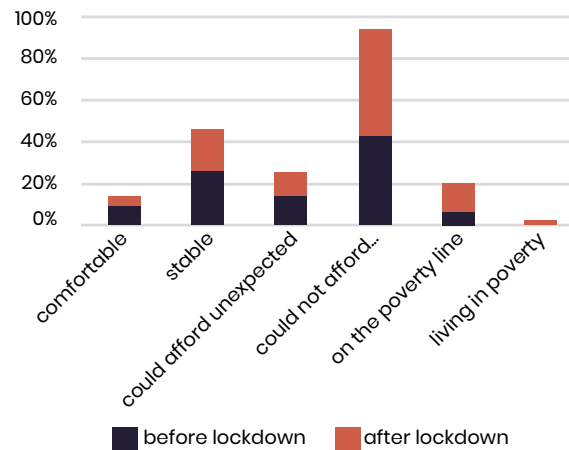


Figure 3: Financial status of employees before and after lockdown

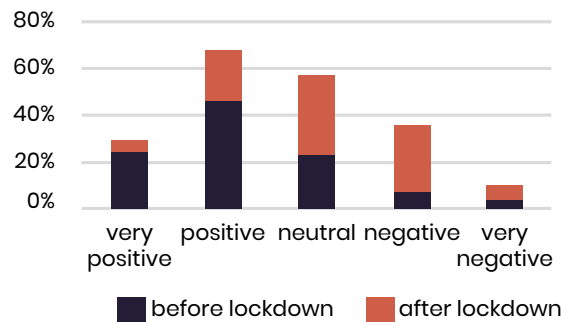


Figure 4: Mental health and well-being before and after lockdown

Stress, demoralisation, and leaving ECEC

Before lockdown, over half of employees said their stress levels were average; after lockdown, stress levels had risen dramatically: 39% said their stress levels were above average. They indicated experiences of anxiety due to finances and working conditions:

“I feel I will be leaving the sector in the coming months, as the stress and anxiety from the job is getting too much and for so little pay.”

Nearly a quarter of respondents said the Covid-19 lockdown gave them time to consider leaving their careers due to demoralisation, financial hardship, and working conditions:

“I am at breaking point and can’t take any more.”

“Feeling demoralised ... we have a shed as a staffroom but can’t be in there with someone from another pod. I don’t relish winter, having lunch in my car. Our workload has increased but [we] have been given no extra time to clean. Really want a change of career.”

Some respondents questioned the value of their labour and the cost of completing further qualifications when they are not recognised and valued as a profession – particularly compared with their primary and second-level counterparts. Many cited stressful and precarious working conditions combined with the lack of a professional salary and recognition as contributing factors to their stress, which only increased during the lockdown period:

“I have an honours degree, and the conditions within the sector are so bad I feel like I wasted 3 years studying for an undervalued and underpaid sector. ... The pandemic has highlighted the poor working conditions but has in no way changed them. I feel it’s worse now than ever before.”

The perceived lack of government recognition, in light of the importance of ECEC in opening up the economy, left many employees disillusioned:

“[It] showed me how little the government cares about us as a sector, meaning they need us but are unwilling to pay us correctly.”

A chance to relax

An interesting theme that emerged from the responses was the sense that the lockdown period gave some employees a break to relax from the stresses of working in the sector: ‘Lots of time to reflect and think about best practice.’ Others said it gave them an opportunity to relax and reaffirm the love they have for their profession. However, most indicated relief: ‘a break from long hours at work for little pay’, with some saying they were ‘less stressed than when in work’.

Conclusion

In a time of global unrest and stress, during which the novel coronavirus has disrupted the day-to-day lives and economies of people all over the world, it is interesting to note that a significant number of ECEC employees in Ireland felt rested, relaxed, and less stressed than in their daily working lives. It is concerning that almost a quarter of employees, having rested and reflected, indicated their intent to leave the sector.

The survey offers an insightful indication of the mental health and well-being of ECEC employees. They have referred to low wages, stressful working conditions, and lack of recognition as impacting them negatively; even more so after lockdown. We know the impact on children's development when the adults in their lives cannot sustain quality interactions with them. If ECEC employees are not given a stable regular income, in the form of a professional salary, with professional working conditions, it is our children and society who will ultimately pay the price.

Note: Thank you to the members of the community of professional practice who completed this survey. We understand and acknowledge the emotional burden placed on you to continually put in the unpaid labour of educating others about the precarity of your lived experiences. Thank you to the administrators who facilitate professional conversations and supported (and many times counselled) ECEC professionals in their times of distress: Lee Herlihy, Valerie Gaynor, Annemarie Kelly, Ann Keating O'Neill, Clair Battle, and David King.

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ENDNOTES

1. Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals Ireland (MECPI) is an online community of professional practice which has been in existence since 2008. It has just over 7,000 members in varying positions in the ECEC sector across Ireland and is operated by voluntary administrators. See www.earlychildhoodprofessionalsirl.com for more information.

“ Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions.

- Diane Ravitch

Moving to Online Learning

A case study in collaboration

When Covid-19 prevented training for Early Childhood professionals and parents from being delivered in the usual way, Better Start and the Hanen Centre had to respond. This article reflects on the experience of developing and delivering Hanen's 'Teacher Talk' online.

Background

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides a range of supports to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. In the seven-stepped model, levels 1-3 provide universal supports designed to promote an inclusive culture. Level 3 provides for a 'broad multi-annual programme of training' designed to build a 'confident and competent' workforce (DCYA, 2020).

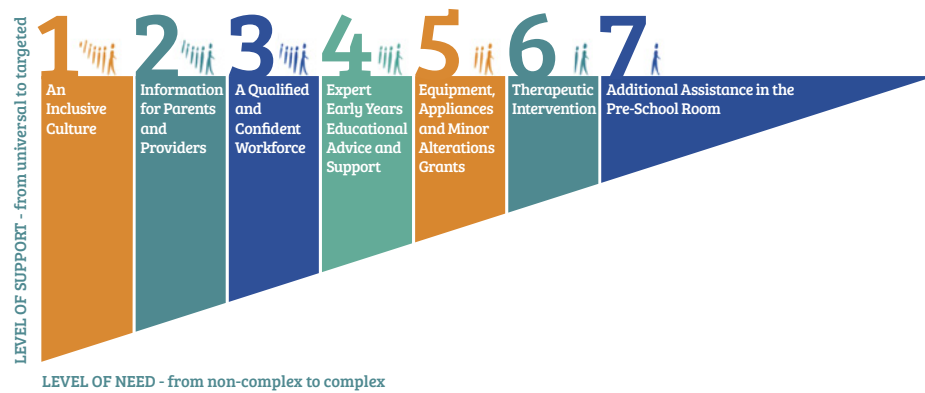
At level 3, Better Start Early Years specialists deliver Teacher Talk under licence to the Hanen Centre. The Hanen approach to language development recognises the challenge of creating inclusive learning environments for children with a learning disability: 'A child with special needs requires very specific and consistent support to become an active and participating member of the classroom' (Weitzman and Greenberg, 2002). Teacher Talk provides a step-by-step approach to providing that support through a series of interactive strategies. Better Start began delivering Teacher Talk in 2018, and by March 2020, 1,116 early years practitioners had completed it. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and all schools and education facilities for early years and care were closed, all training was paused.

Here, along with Janice Greenberg, Director of Early Childhood Education Services, The Hanen Centre, Toronto, Canada, I reflect on the challenges to both the Hanen Centre and Better Start of moving to an online training environment while maintaining our commitment to supporting the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector and the integrity of Teacher Talk. We discuss the challenge of using webinar tools and the potential of using a learning management system for both tutors and learners.



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A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme for Children with a Disability



Developing the online content: Janice Greenberg reflects

The onset of the pandemic has challenged all of us to re-evaluate how we do our work given the current restrictions. This has certainly been true at the Hanen Centre, where we were faced with how to continue to provide training to professionals and parents when we could no longer congregate in the same physical space.

Teacher Talk training is one of Hanen's offerings that we converted relatively quickly to an online format. Traditionally, Teacher Talk has been offered as three one-day in-person trainings that provide an overview of key strategies. Early-childhood educators learn how to promote learning and language development through a variety of daily activities.

The structure and format of Teacher Talk derive from evidence-based best practices that promote adult learning. These include:

- active engagement of adult learners
- demonstrated relevance of the training content to learners' real-life needs
- dialogue and problem-solving
- opportunities for practice of new behaviours with supportive feedback.

During in-person Teacher Talk sessions, these principles are implemented through frequent opportunities for large-group discussions, small-group activities and brainstorming, and practice role plays where learners try out new language-facilitating strategies.

In developing the online version of Teacher Talk, we were challenged by how to maximise participant engagement. We started by selecting an online platform that allowed for:

- group discussion in gallery view, where the facilitator and all participants can be seen on the screen simultaneously
- breakouts where participants can be sent to separate areas for discussion and practice

- slide-sharing to allow use of Teacher Talk PowerPoint slides that are integral to the in-person training
- sharing of videos that provide important examples showing educators implementing Teacher Talk strategies
- a chat function that provides a quick way to collect responses from several participants.

So far, one of the Teacher Talk trainings, 'Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings', has been converted to an online version (Janice Greenberg, Director of Early Childhood Education Services, The Hanen Centre, Toronto).

Better Start's experience of delivering training online

As the pandemic began, Better Start was in the process of commissioning a learning management system that would administer training and develop both synchronous and asynchronous content. This work was still in progress on 29 May when Better Start received Hanen's Teacher Talk online content 'Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings'. A number of tasks lay ahead:

- finding, procuring, and testing a webinar tool with advanced features such as breakout rooms
- introducing the tutors to the webinar tool.

“ Eight courses of 'Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings' were offered and completed in July–August 2020.

On a video call to the Hanen Centre in June, attended by licensed tutors from Canada, Australia, and the UK, there was a common thread: How, as a tutor, would you cope with the technology, and what would it mean for learner engagement? A tutor from the Hanen Centre shared her experience of delivering the content online and managing the technology, and offered tips for promoting learner engagement.

Eight courses of 'Encouraging Language Development in Early Childhood Settings' were offered and completed in July–August 2020. When completed, the tutors were surveyed.

What worked well:

- testing the webinar tool in advance
- the Hanen Teacher Talk online content was easy to navigate and understand.

Challenges:

- multitasking between facilitation and IT functioning
- developing interactions with participants
- engagement was much reduced in this format.

Tips for promoting learner engagement:

- pause and count to 10 slowly while waiting for a response
- share experience and own examples to encourage reflection

- prompt contributions, acknowledge and thank participants and say their name when they contribute, repeat or interpret what they are saying, and link to the content or Hanen strategy.

Learners were surveyed after completing the three-session course. There were 122 responses. When learners were asked to grade the session from 1 'not useful' to 5 'very useful', the average score was 4.57. As a sample of their feedback, the most useful things they learned included:

- greater understanding of how the child's stage of language development and their conversational styles impact on their communication with others.
- having a greater awareness of my own role in how I interact with the children and the roles I take throughout the day, be it helper, entertainer, etc.
- I found the personal stories and experiences from the trainer interesting and useful from her experiences of working with children over the years.

Asked how the session could be better, 11.4% experienced technical issues, and 7.3% would have preferred a classroom learning experience. The remainder commented on the length of the tea break.

Moving towards a bichronous approach using the learning management system:

just as blended learning affords instructors and designers the opportunity to make use of the best of both online learning and face-to-face learning (e.g., flipped classrooms), bichronous online learning offers us the opportunity to integrate the best of both asynchronous and synchronous online learning experiences. (Educause, 2020)

The next round of Hanen Teacher Talk in the online format will begin at the end of September 2020. Following feedback and discussion on the test phase, supplementary asynchronous material has been developed on the learning management system to support learners in putting Hanen strategies into practice. This includes relevant slides from the 'live' session, a Hanen video that demonstrates the strategy, and a web form to record learners' reflection on using the strategy and the child's response. The learners' reflections will be available to the tutor before the next session, so learners have the opportunity to share their experiences, linking the live session to practice in early learning and care settings.

Conclusion

We could not have foreseen the changes that would take place due to the pandemic. Both the Hanen Centre and Better Start had to adapt quickly to a new online learning environment. Better Start's thinking on how we engage learners continues to evolve. For the foreseeable future, it seems that learning and development programmes will largely be delivered remotely, through the use of available technologies, and this will continue to affect learner experiences.

“ When learners were asked to grade the session from 1-not useful to 5-very useful, the average score was 4.57. ”

We intend to continue to review and adapt our modes of delivery, in consultation with participants and collaborating partners, to maximise engagement and ensure that continuing professional development remains available. We hope that the content we provide, using synchronous and asynchronous material, will support our mentoring role and the training we deliver, as our engagement with this new learning environment continues to evolve. In this we are not alone: 'Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information, and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus have caused might be here to stay' (World Economic Forum, 2020).

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Education Outdoors

Children at Horizons Montessori, Bishopstown, Cork, enjoy the outdoor space prepared for them by Ms Lee Herlihy, to meet the needs imposed by Covid-19.

During the Covid-19 closure, the home learning environment (HLE) became the key setting in which children could learn. Digital technology provided a space between the HLE and Early Learning and Care setting, in which relationships for learning could continue. Educators and providers used the Aistear framework to reimagine learning with young children, focusing on building the well-being so necessary for early learning and mental health.

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, the Taoiseach announced that due to Covid-19, Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) services had to close that very day, in order to protect public health (RTÉ, 2020). A sizeable proportion reopened on 29 June, and the remainder by early September, often with reduced capacity. The operational and personal stresses experienced by providers since the onset of Covid-19 are well described by Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) (2020a).

ECI sought and published our members' stories of connection and engagement with children and families during the closure through our *Scéalta* online blog and e-zines, to encourage peer learning in a time of turmoil. Many providers and educators continued to connect despite the pressure and uncertainty they were experiencing, challenging the common construction of the 'childcare' service as primarily a contractual and monetary transaction between parents and providers in the private marketplace.

Settings used commonplace digital technology to maintain relationships during a time of enforced physical distance, learning new skills to do so, showing creativity, and falling back on their profession's tools – reflective practice and the national curriculum – to maintain the relationships that frame high-quality pedagogy. This article recounts three such stories.

As Covid-19 restrictions will continue into 2021, and parents remain physically distant from settings and educators, this article considers what might be learned from these online experiences that could support parental partnership practices and reinforce the connections between the Home Learning Environment (HLE) and ELC settings. It reflects on the opportunities and limitations to engaging and enabling partnership with parents online.

Early Learning and Care Services:

Connecting with Children and Parents during Covid-19



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Childhood Ireland

Stories of connection in a crisis

Aistear (NCCA, 2009, p. 27) affirms that relationships and interactions are at the heart of early learning and development. The depth of the relationships between providers and educators and children and parents meant that the relationships continued beyond the physical ELC setting and into the home: providers and educators felt a kind of grief following the sudden closure of services.

Orlagh Doyle, a provider in County Wexford, explained:

The arrival of Covid-19 had left us bereft; and, like everyone else, it really shook us to the core. As the dust settled in the second week of lockdown, we recognised the need to reach out and offer solace to each other, the families and especially our children of Carraig Briste. As adults we felt confused and anxious; it was unimaginable what this might feel like for a child. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020b)

Orlagh and staff discussed how to stay connected with children and families through WhatsApp. They began by videoing a short clip of themselves in their home environments:

As a shared message of how much we miss them, and us doing a big clap for the children for staying at home too. This was an incredibly simple idea that brought so much happiness and reassurance. As a team, it was a lot of fun. (ibid.)

The online engagement evolved to include hosting online baking mornings, gardening in the greenhouse, visits out on the farm, and telling bedtime stories. Facebook was used to privately share photos and video with the children and families as a group, and the Child Diary app allowed one-to-one contact with parents.

“ Providers and educators felt a kind of grief following the sudden closure of services.

Veronique Didi, a provider at Piccolini Play and Learn Preschool in County Wicklow, together with a parent organised a conference call with a large group of children and parents using the GoToMeeting app. Children were asked to tell a story of something they loved that they did or saw during their day. They were encouraged to paint or draw and to keep the artefacts for their scrapbooks in the setting:

A few interesting stories emerged, and from that evolved our emergent curriculum, as we do in playschool every day. One child had been in the woods and found a sheep jaw that she showed to everyone on the conference call. (Didi, 2020)

Veronique linked the sheep jaw with the curriculum on dinosaurs that had been instituted based on children's interests prior to closure, and a new learning programme was born about omnivores and their teeth, which was shared with the children privately online. At the end of the session, the children were asked to make, draw, or paint a monster of their choice with a lot of teeth. They showed their monsters to each other in a later session and were very proud.

A related learning programme on favourite foods emerged through the interactions with the children. The children created a plate of their favourite foods using sand, play dough, paint, and collage. Based on their interests, a science experiment emerged for another online session, with the educators using boiling water, red cabbage, vinegar, sodium bicarbonate, and bleach solutions to make colours from the foodstuffs.

Samantha Hallows, a provider at Giddy-Ups Preschool in Dublin, established 'Super Shed' to 'bridge the gap between preschool and home' when her service closed. The concept came from the shed that children were familiar with in the preschool garden:

I came up with the idea to contact parents of the children in my setting ... and asked the parents to ask their children what was their favourite story from the preschool. ... I got a list from the parents of the stories that the children wanted to hear. So, I set myself up in the Super Shed and I began recording myself reading the stories, reminding myself and others that this is not about my storytelling abilities or lack of – it's about reconnecting. We care about children and the families that come to our settings. With the help of my son Aaron, we set up a YouTube channel, and the journey began. (Hallows, 2020a)

Samantha went on to develop a Super Shed gallery as 'a platform to raise children's well-being and promote parental involvement'. As well as continuing to send their story requests, the children were encouraged to send photos of their artwork inspired by the stories. The gallery became a tool to promote creativity, imagination, and conversation at home and to keep the children connected with each other. Samantha wrote:

The Aistear curriculum depicts learning as a 'journey'. The Gallery is a convenient shareable reflection tool; it can be revisited for pleasure or educational curricular planning purposes. Parents are logging on to YouTube and visiting the 'Super Shed Gallery' with their children. (Hallows, 2020b)

Discussion

The stories in this article exemplify how providers and educators moved quickly with the needs of children and families, connecting with them. These actions speak to Bruckauf and Hayes's (2017, p. 1) assertion that high-quality ELC settings are those that are responsive to the dynamic nature of children's lives, with quality built through partnership across family, parents, and settings, using effective communication channels to and from the child's home learning environment (HLE).

During 2020, with ELC services and public libraries closed, the HLE became the key setting in which young children could learn. Digital technology provided a liminal space between the HLE and the ELC setting in which relationships for learning could continue, and where educators and providers used the Aistear framework to reimagine learning with young children, focusing on building the well-being so necessary for early learning and mental health.

“I set myself up in the Super Shed and began recording myself reading the stories, reminding myself that this was about reconnecting.”

“Nothing we do remotely will substitute for the pure physicality and intentionality of what we do each day.”

Educators and providers used the emergent curriculum to reflect on their knowledge of the children's interests to continue and extend learning online. They remained active designers of learning environments, attuned observers of children's experiences, and energetic communicators. The outcomes remain unknown, as we do not have the perspectives of parents and children. But we should absolutely take heart from a message embedded in these Covid-19 stories: that Aistear, though only ten years old, is deeply embedded in the beliefs and practices of many educators. In a global pandemic, educators looked to the early years curriculum and their professional knowledge to guide them.

The experiences from March to June 2020 pose questions for the future. Was this digital activity a stopgap measure, or is the online environment a space that can be developed further for child-centred early learning? Can a play-based relational pedagogy really be achieved primarily online? These questions go to the heart of what early education is for, how teaching and learning happen, and what an early educator's role is.

A blog post from an educator in Australia – a country with remote early education for children, due to geographical isolation – asserts that teaching remotely won't be largely beneficial for young children:

Nothing we do remotely will substitute for the pure physicality and intentionality of what we do each day. We can't observe a child using tongs and note that their fine motor skills need developing; we can't see their authentic and deep interest in bugs in the garden bed; we can't theorise together, experiment together, laugh together, hug together or make funny faces at each other from across the classroom. Video chats and emails can only do so much in lieu of the pure physicality that is early childhood; it's about relationships and it's all about play. (Anastasi, 2020)

These passionate observations about children's experiences in and benefits from participation in early education settings with skilled, confident educators reflect why ECI and our members fight so hard to keep ELC (and SAC) services open to children and families during this pandemic. This is why play-pods as a public health measure are far preferable to requiring educators, babies, and young children to wear masks or asking them to achieve the impossible and remain physically distant in an environment where physical affection and caregiving are intricately connected with teaching and early learning.

Of course, digital technology is already in the Irish early education room, but not as a replacement for in-room teaching and learning. 'Digital documentation' using commercial software is being used by ELC settings to capture learning for assessment through video, audio, and photos, shared with parents through apps. Given that parents will remain physically distant from settings for 2021 at least, a substantial period of early childhood may involve the parent-setting relationship being lived out through technology.

It is therefore important to find innovative ways for the home and ELC settings to partner in the virtual world to support children's learning. We need to use the digital world effectively for children. To do that, providers

and educators will need to be able to integrate technology in everyday practice, and develop the knowledge to select and use digital technologies to share learning with parents that are based on child-centred, play-based learning theory.

Thank you to ECI members for writing their stories and supporting peer learning in the ELC sector.

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Ethic at Hill Street Family Resource Centre, an Inter-Cultural Centre for families and children based in Dublin's North East Inner City.

How Early-Years and School-Age Childcare Providers Dealt with the Pandemic

This article introduces a qualitative study developed by Early Childhood Ireland aimed at assessing the impact of Covid-19 on Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare providers in Ireland, as well as providers' main concerns about reopening. The results assess the effectiveness of the Covid-19 supports and point to the many challenges that lie ahead.

The Covid-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the sustainability of the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC/SAC) sector in Ireland. In this challenging context, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) developed a research project in summer 2020, with two main objectives: (1) to identify the strategies used by early years and school-age care providers to deal with the lockdown, along with their rationales for action, and (2) to identify their main concerns and considerations about reopening. Based on providers' views, the study explores the effectiveness of the Covid-19 supports and how the emerging challenges intertwine with pre-existing structural barriers to prevent the sector from operating successfully.

A qualitative enquiry was employed based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. In order to develop a deep and inclusive understanding of a sector that is essentially diverse, a maximum variation sampling strategy was used. Twenty participants were recruited from Early Childhood Ireland's membership base, according to service type and location variables. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to content analysis, and the findings were published as a report, which can be accessed on ECI's website.

The results show that the main strategy used by participants to weather the lockdown was to sign up to the Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme (TWCSS). The TWCSS was provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and complemented the Revenue-operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). In other words, the government took over the responsibility for wages. Services were also entitled to receive support for overhead payments, amounting to 15% of eligible staff gross weekly pay, with a minimum payment of €300 per week.

The interviews reveal important nuances of the policy. First and foremost, the wage supports were the key factor in maintaining employment ties in the sector and in keeping settings afloat during



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the period. Despite these positives, significant weaknesses were also cited, such as operational difficulties and the lack of tailoring of the supports towards overhead costs to specific types of settings. The overhead payment did not cover costs to the same degree in urban areas, where expenses such as rent are higher. This stands as a good example of the shortcomings of one-size-fits-all policy approaches.

The interviews clarify the reasons that some providers chose not to join the scheme. It is important to note that the take-up rate of the TWSS corresponded to approximately 85% of registered providers (DCYA, 2020). Firstly, there was uncertainty over the length of the closure. The shorter the closure, the less a provider would lose out on the benefits of participating.

Secondly, there was a lack of clarity on the financial terms of the agreement and on the general information being given by the DCYA, which led to uncertainty about the scheme itself. This lack of clarity created confusion, which was compounded by conflicting information being shared on social media.

This way, the interviews suggest that the decision to not participate was caused by failures in communication between the government and providers, not by any real problem with the scheme itself. There were also cases where participation was not an option for providers. This was related to eligibility rules that precluded settings that did not receive government subsidies prior to the pandemic from joining the scheme.

Overall, when looking to the future, the pandemic has added an extra layer of complexity to pre-existing problems in the ELC/SAC sector. Take staffing, for example. According to Pobal (2019), more than half of services reported challenges in recruiting qualified staff in 2018/2019. During the pandemic, participants are expecting further recruitment difficulties. Interviewees pointed to the inevitable prospect of staff being absent from work more often, because of health and safety guidelines, and because many workers who would normally have taken their holidays during the summer will do so later in the year. The reopening requirements on pods and cleaning procedures also create new staffing demands.

Covid-19 has also created new problems. Reduced demand for services is a particular concern among rural providers. Providers also repeatedly expressed various concerns about children's mental and physical health. They questioned how they could be expected to differentiate between Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 illnesses in the absence of fast testing turnaround, and noted the impact this would have on the ability of their settings to operate.

Not surprisingly, high levels of stress and anxiety have been reported. However, the June reopening package was generally well received by participants. The package included a once-off reopening support payment, a once-off capital grant, continuation of the Revenue-operated TWSS, and resumption of the DCYA funding schemes. The continuation of the TWSS in particular was seen as essential to sustain the staffing requirements in the pandemic. The increased focus on the importance of the sector could ease the tense relationship between the state and providers – but this will ultimately depend on future policy developments.

Facilitating a Successful Transition from Home to Preschool

A sociocultural perspective

This article examines how educators and parents can enable young children to make a successful transition from home to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting. A model developed in Dublin's North East Inner City highlights the value of taking a fresh perspective on family engagement in ECEC.

Introduction

Although not the focus of a wide range of existing literature, the transition made by many young children from their home to an ECEC setting is among the most significant that they will face in their young lives (O'Kane, 2016). Transitions from one environment to another are important milestones for all children (Government of Ireland, 2018), because well-functioning transitions are crucial to 'supporting a child's current and future capacity for learning and development' (CECDE, 2006, p.8). However, transitions can often be times of stress for children and families, requiring support and understanding to enable both child and setting to successfully adapt.

The role of the ECEC professional

Having an understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of early childhood enables ECEC professionals to be sensitive to the diverse ways that child development is constructed and enacted in families and communities, which can influence caregivers' expectations of the young child and their early care and education (Margetts & Kienig, 2013).

It is important for educators to make explicit links between children's sociocultural contexts and their experiences (Vogler et al., 2008), especially when the home culture differs from the prevailing philosophy in a setting (Sabol et al., 2018). This may involve professionals drawing on 'beliefs and knowledge about early childhood, in ways that are appropriate to local circumstances and changing practices' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 4).

Given that their parents' involvement in an early years setting can positively affect a child's well-being (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 39), and that effective engagement with parents has 'real potential to narrow the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds' (Goodall, 2017, p. 1), the ways that ECEC professionals co-operate with



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parents, to effectively support children's successful transition to ECEC, is worth deeper consideration.

Reframing parental involvement in ECEC

Building partnerships with parents in ECEC is generally framed as a way to raise awareness of the benefits of parents participating in and enhancing their child's early education, and to give them opportunities to do so (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 7). Some authors write that for effective partnerships to yield wider, positive results for families and communities, professionals need to engage in more meaningful parental involvement (Muller, 2009). The types of 'light touch' activities (Sabol et al., 2018) that are sometimes observed in Irish preschools are not always associated with positive impacts for children and do not necessarily create strong ties or meaningful gains in social capital (Small, 2017).

Parents and carers can be facilitated to guide children through a transition, with 'cultural mediation tools' such as play and routines enabling them to adapt successfully to their new 'pupil identity' (Lam and Pollard, 2006, pp. 131–132). Nonetheless, inequalities in economic or ethnic background may hinder cooperation between home and educational settings (Englund, 2010; Osgood, 2012). This requires educators to further acknowledge the various barriers that may affect some caregivers, and to appreciate the added benefits for particular families of having a positive sense of connection with their children's care and educational institutions (Vogler et al., 2008).

“The ways that ECEC professionals co-operate with parents, to effectively support children's successful transition to ECEC, is worth deeper consideration.”

In this context, there seems to be real potential for a shift in emphasis during a child's early days in the ECEC setting, from the traditional settling-in process towards an alternative vision of building trust between parents, children, and professionals, by having fun and engaging in activities together. This repositions parents and carers as important actors in the introduction process, acknowledging their joint role in caring for the child (Markström & Simonsson, 2017) and framing an expectation that they will be actively involved in the setting from the beginning.

However, even if this fresh approach to collaborating actively with parents is embraced by an already exhausted ECEC workforce, there remains a reluctance to take a step further, to recognise the added value of promoting parents' own well-being and skill development through the ECEC setting. The benefits of this type of engagement are supported by research that finds the interests of young children and parents to be both compatible and synergistic (Brooks-Gunn et al, 2000).

One innovative model, which draws on a sociocultural perspective and embodies principles of parental empowerment, has been developed by a family resource centre based in the North East Inner City of Dublin, in response to a need to support young children in this highly diverse community to make a more positive transition to preschool.

The Preparation for Preschool (PfP) programme in Hill Street Family Resource Centre was originally designed to engage with children, while their parents and carers left the premises, but has since evolved to include

parents by enabling them to have a deeper understanding of their child's early transitions and make better connections within their community.

“Adults separate from children by gradually withdrawing from their play session, to attend a parents' group run by an experienced community development worker.”

Adults separate from children by gradually withdrawing from their play session, to attend a parents' group run by an experienced community development worker. The play session is facilitated by skilled ECEC professionals, whose interactions and activities focus on children's socio-emotional skills and language development. Communication between parents and professionals is ongoing, during and after the group. There is explicit emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, and one member of the team can converse with a number of families through their home language.

Parents and carers who recently contributed to research on the PfP programme, which was conducted through the Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) in DCU, identify a wide range of benefits, including their children becoming more capable and independent. Local ECEC professionals report directly observing the children who attend their settings transitioning more successfully to preschool, while their parents and carers seem able to connect more confidently with staff than other parents are.

This home-grown innovation offers a compelling demonstration of the potential for 'competent systems' (Urban et al., 2012), to support parents and carers from diverse backgrounds, to build their own capacity, becoming more invested in the structures and processes that underpin their children's experiences of early education and care, creating tangible, lasting connections that benefit families and the wider community.

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Creative Kids

Children adjust to the 'new normal' at Creative Kids & Co, Walkinstown, Dublin, following adjustments made to the outdoor space and practice by Manager Valerie Gaynor and staff, in light of COVID-19.

A View from the Ground

Lockdown at Wallaroo Playschool

Most of the discourse on Covid-19's impact on early childhood education and care has focused on the broad issues. Less attention has been paid to the reality of these services on the ground having to cope with sudden and drastic disruption. This article gives an account of events at one preschool in Cork as they came to terms with the new and challenging reality.

A lot has been written and said about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on early childhood education and care. Public debate and media have focused on broader issues like the (in)ability to provide reliable 'childcare' for working parents, including essential 'frontline workers', or the cost of keeping a broken system afloat in times of crisis and disruption. Less attention has been paid to the reality of early childhood services on the ground having to come to terms with sudden and drastic change, disruption, and existential crises due to lockdown.

This is an account of events unfolding at one preschool, Wallaroo Playschool in Cork, after the announcement of lockdown in March 2020. It is my story; it does not represent anything but my own experience. But perhaps it connects to your story, and to others out there in the real world of working with young children and their families and communities. If it does, maybe the many stories of early childhood educators from this challenging time will come together in a collective memory of how the early childhood community coped with Covid-19. With all our stories woven into the tapestry, it may become one of hope, persistence, and overcoming adversity.

On Thursday 12 March the staff at Wallaroo Playschool sat around a radio brought into the office to hear what the Taoiseach was saying about the lockdown. It felt a bit like waiting to hear news about going to war. Yes, preschools were to close from the 13th – but did that mean we would come in on Friday and then close? After much debate, we decided that when we went home at 6 p.m. we would stay closed until further notice. We did not realise how long that would be. It felt so eerie leaving with a premonition that the world we lived in was about to change, but it was a beautiful day, so it also felt a bit like getting out of school early.

I contacted all parents and staff by email and text and informed them. We had already been sending information to parents about the pandemic and what we were doing to keep it at bay in our setting.



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Cork

They would hear it on the news, but I wanted them to have a personal message from us.

I felt a strong urge to keep coming in to the office, and that is what I did for the following week. I contacted parents and staff daily. My intentions were to keep the connection opened and to reassure and to let everyone know that while the service was closed down, we as staff were still working and available, though in what shape I was not sure yet. I felt safe coming in to the office, as I was the only person at first, but as the week went on, other team members started dropping in. Perhaps, like me, they felt lost at home and needed the normality of connecting with what we know best – our workplace.

As the messages to the public became clearer that we should not travel more than 2 kilometres unless necessary, I decided to set up office at home. During that first week, before I realised I was stretching the meaning of ‘necessary’, the weather was amazingly sunny, and one of the childcare team and I decided to tackle our bald, over-used garden. We dug and we raked and we sowed grass seed and watered. Over the next few weeks my colleague, who lives close by, came in and kept at it, as whatever seed we put down became a large picnic for the now very unafraid and greedy growing bird population in the locality!

The next stage for us was to set up direct contacts between childcare staff in our three services and the parents and children they worked with. This meant ensuring that each childcare team manager had a smartphone to set up WhatsApp groups with parents who wished to participate. This was easier said than done and required help from the more technically savvy team members. The managers then sent ideas of the daily routines their children had been used to, activities to do with children, and songs and rhymes that the children were used to hearing.

This kind of communication between staff and parents continued for the next few months, only ending at the end of June, when preschool would have finished anyway. The parents also contacted each other through the WhatsApp group, and a side benefit was that people made connections with other parents they may not have known, and they supported each other all the way through. It was interesting for us that the school-age children and parents were less inclined to respond to communications from us, and we assumed this was because the communications with the schools were satisfying enough and maybe just enough.

During this stage, as coordinator I had contact with the parent body about once a week. I sent short communications if there was anything that might reassure or soothe them, for example a message to say that although a local school had reported a case of Covid-19, we had not heard from any of our families that they were being tested. I sent information of events online, meditations, music and blogs from a parenting website that had good advice on coping with lockdown at home.

I was more distant from the parents, as I did not have personal relationships with many of them, but I felt a strong sense of responsibility to keep connected with them. My main contact was with the childcare team to see how they were managing their own communications; to check if there were

issues arising and to see how they themselves were managing to balance work at home and family life. It was different for everyone depending on the stage of life of their children and of those they were caring for and their own health. There were staff members that I knew were living alone and could be quite isolated, and I took special care to contact them more often.

Although most of my emails and phone calls were to the four childcare team managers, from April onwards, when the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme came into effect, organisations were requested by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to contact all staff members and make sure they were using their paid time usefully, and I encouraged all who could to take up the training opportunities that the Department made available on the *First 5* website.

Two of our services are in Direct Provision centres for asylum seekers, where the scale of involvement was much different and the need for contact and other supports became obvious. Many issues here were brought into focus by the lockdown. The pandemic necessitated the closing of the centres’ doors and the sudden withdrawal of volunteers and services like ours, leaving residents isolated from community and confined in cramped conditions.

Children were expected to do schoolwork from their home with no devices, poor or no internet, or three or more children sharing the parents’ only phone. I was concerned that children would be confined to their rooms by parents who feared the virus and might not know that outside activity was not only good but safer than indoors in terms of the virus. I knew it was hard for people in the community who had children at home all day, but here were children and adults at home all day in one room. I was afraid for their mental and physical well-being.

One voluntary group had set up a phone tree, which I joined. We each contacted three to four residents weekly to find out how they were getting on and to offer phone support. The group also kept in touch with each other if any practical support was needed, such as clothing or other supplies. The group contacted the schools for one centre, and we were able to ascertain whether children were sending in schoolwork.

I contacted all the families to find out what the issues were, and we were able to resolve them by accessing devices on loan from the school or getting donations of laptops or modems. The childcare team manager in the other centre contacted the local school and found out how children were managing their work. The school decided to change their method of communication from email to phone, and to only give book work, as the children had no internet access in their rooms. They arranged for children’s school books to be sent to the centre.

Both childcare team managers communicated with the children through closed Facebook pages and WhatsApp, offering activities, projects, songs, and homemade videos. Children sent back messages and photos of their work and art projects. Communication was constant, and we were made aware of the emotional field as well, which, as expected, varied from family to family depending on their resources and situations.

Organisations and groups came forward offering help and support. Donations of arts and care packages came in, which brought joy and relief. We helped to coordinate the distribution of these with various organisations and agencies.

Through it all, the parents and children were amazing and found strength to endure the difficulties they were experiencing. They formed their own shopping group, so only three or four adults went shopping for everyone each week. They cared for each other, they participated remotely in what activities were available online, they studied, and some continued to work. Some have children with serious health problems or additional needs; others had mental health difficulties before all this and miraculously endured.

Another aspect of the pandemic was to deal with the financial situation. As a community organisation we look to break even and to continually improve our services if we have profits. The childcare sector was lucky that we could access the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and also the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS). I am lucky to have someone who works with me ten hours a week dealing with the financial aspect of operating a childcare organisation: wages, returns to Revenue, grant applications, financial reports to the board of directors, and a host of other jobs that would be a nightmare for me to tackle.

Once we went into TWSS and TWSCS country, this poor woman was working day and night trying to figure out how to operate these schemes, how they fitted with each other, and how to adapt as the parameters kept changing. Of course I had to keep abreast of it with her, so it was an agonising journey for me with my poor accountancy skills. We are still dealing with all of this, but at least the new Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is simpler and hopefully will last long enough for us to get the hang of it before it changes again.

I would have been lost without the board of directors, whom I leaned on heavily during this period. Major decisions needed to be made almost every week. So they met with me remotely every week and carried me through some very anxious times. I am also full of admiration for the staff I work with, who took up the baton and ran with it at first call. Feedback from parents and children helped me to see that we were providing a service that was needed and appreciated during the Covid-19 lockdown.

How we came to open up again, with all the new regulations and procedures and fears, is a whole other story, and when I have fully recovered from that I might be ready to tell it.

So many amazing, beautiful things happened because of the lockdown: the robin who used our cloakroom cubbies for a nest and hatched a family, appreciative responses from parents, an art project (Little Bird Babble) that engaged the children in Direct Provision for weeks with wildlife outside their doors, and the incredibly generous response from people wanting to help with children and families in Direct Provision.

What I learned about myself and this childcare sector which I am privileged to be part of is that we are resilient, optimistic, creative, adaptable, and absolutely necessary for the economic and emotional stability of this nation.

The Long Shadow of Discrimination

A call to comprehensively address diversity, equality, and inclusion in early childhood education and care

This article draws attention to the need for political leadership and decisive action in addressing diversity, equality and inclusion in early childhood education and care. Recent political and social events have again raised issues of discrimination and racism in Irish society, with profound implications for the lives of young children. We must move beyond rhetoric and take action.

1998 saw the first national early childhood conference addressing diversity, equality and inclusion in Ireland, titled 'Education without Prejudice: A Challenge for Early Years Educators in Ireland' and hosted by Pavee Point. Doreen Reynolds, sharing her experience of racism in Ireland, said, 'I am not people's assumption'.¹ She spoke about her concern for her young son:

My son was first a victim at the age of three when he came home from nursery school, obviously upset and angry, and said, 'Black is yuck, Mummy?' And I thought to myself, Here we go, how do I handle this? Trying not to take it too out of hand, because as I said, I tried to understand the way Irish people see me, but my child was a victim of racism. (Pavee Point, 2001)

Chrissy Joyce, a young Traveller woman, gave voice to her experience of racism in Irish society, specifically in the maternity and education systems, drawing attention to her emancipation as a mother and mature student:

There is nothing like having the responsibility of small children to make you question what is fair and what is just in a society that fails to treat all children equally, regardless of what group they belong to. On a personal level, no more was I prepared to go back at twenty-six years of age and sit in a classroom and deny my identity and deny the experience that has made me the person that I am. (Pavee Point, 2001)

While revisiting these testimonials recently, it struck me how little has changed in the past twenty-two years in addressing racism and discrimination at individual, societal, and service levels. Of course, there has been welcome movement in terms of policies, strategies, and messaging – but how much has really changed in practice? Only last week the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that 'Irish Travellers have the highest rates of acute poverty, the lowest



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employment rates and face some of the worst discrimination of six Traveller and Roma communities across Europe' (Holland, 2020).

In May 2020 the Black Lives Matter campaign became headline news when George Floyd was killed by police in the US (O'Brien, 2020). While there have been many shocking incidents of racial violence by police officers, this killing was a catalyst, an exemplar which highlighted the issue of racism not only in the US but globally, including in Ireland. Most of us felt revulsion and shock. The then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar condemned racism, saying, 'It is right to be angered by injustice. Racism too is a virus, transmitted at an early age, perpetuated by prejudice, sustained by systems' (MerrionStreet.ie, 2020).

We know there are excellent examples from individuals and communities working to address racism and other -isms in our society and our institutions. The policy discourse, however, continues to 'other' Travellers, asylum seekers, and refugees despite the rhetoric for change. In Mac Gréil's (2011) seminal work on prejudice he warns that if the state remains passive or does nothing to support Travellers, there will be consequences for their inclusion. The work of McGinnity et al. in 2017 on discrimination reaffirms Mac Gréil's work.

Some excellent policy documents and guidelines to address exclusion have also been developed in various government departments. In general, however, their implementation has been inadequate. The bottom line is that we have systemically ignored the most marginalised and oppressed in our society, including Travellers and asylum seekers living in Direct Provision centres.

“ If the state remains passive or does nothing to support Travellers, there will be consequences for their inclusion.

For example, the Intercultural Education in Primary and Post-Primary Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2005b) have never been properly implemented or appropriately resourced. The 2006 Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (OMC, 2006) had a similar fate. At the 1998 conference, Mary Wallace, Minister for State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform said:

It is the time to concentrate efforts to rectify the situation by developing an anti-prejudice curriculum, which enables all children to develop positive attitudes so that they can accept, learn and appreciate differences of 'race', culture, language disability, and gender. (Pavee Point, 2001)

Eighteen years later, Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, wrote in the foreword of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Charter and Guidelines:

Inclusion and quality go hand in hand. An inclusive environment where equality is upheld and diversity respected, is fundamental to supporting children to build positive identities, develop a sense of belonging and realise their full potential. (DCYA, 2016)

Training has accompanied the DEI Charter and Guidelines, which is very welcome. But unfortunately the training is not mandatory, nor does it have

resourcing incentives or accreditation for attendance in an already overburdened early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector (Murray, 2017). While important and useful, it is a fifteen-hour programme, which is not enough. If early childhood is to contribute to challenging stereotypes and prejudices, we all have to believe it is necessary, and then proactively and comprehensively address it.

ECEC has a role in laying the foundation for children to view diversity and difference as a positive and rich gift to our society. None of us wants to think that we may have negative thoughts or feelings about diversity, but we are all touched and affected by societal biases, both individually and institutionally. The early childhood sector is a microcosm of broader society and can unknowingly perpetuate and normalise societal inequalities.

There is evidence that ECEC educators have varying levels of comfort when addressing diversity, mainly because they see it as a burden to young children (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2016). This, however, denies the reality of families. The discourses of diversity and equality available to educators can make a difference to how they perceive and approach working with children. These can vary from assimilation to multicultural approach, social justice, and critical pedagogical approaches.

“ The early childhood sector is a microcosm of broader society and can unknowingly perpetuate and normalise societal inequalities.

No policy or guideline, however well developed, will make a difference on its own. The only way to achieve and embed change is to embrace the uncomfortable and begin with a critical reflection on our own values and attitudes in order to unpack how we perceive the world. How often do we do that, if at all, in our training programmes for ECEC, or how much time is given to that exploration? To be truly anti-racist or anti-sexist, it is necessary to unpack our own comfort and discomfort when looking at diversity and equality issues.

Learning and unlearning are part of the process. It is not enough to simply do inclusive activities; it is necessary to be aware of the big issues affecting those who are marginalised and discriminated against in society at economic, social, and political levels. This means recognising the political nature of our work and moving towards a more transformative pedagogy. The DEI Charter and Guidelines offer an opportunity to begin the exploration of self, and give practical guidance to embed a critical Anti-bias approach into practice (Derman-Sparks and Anti-Bias Task Force, 1989; Derman Sparks and Olsen Edwards, 2020).

Demi Isaac Oviawe, an actor in the *Young Offenders* television programme, has spoken about her experience of racism in Cork:

I've been called the n-word thousands of times, but my youngest brother is only four, so it's really terrible. The children who called my brother this name were not much older than him – between the ages of about four and seven. (Horgan, 2020)

Senator Eileen Flynn, the first Traveller appointed to a government position, has spoken about her experiences of racism and her personal challenge in owning her identity as a Traveller. She describes her biggest fear:

Billie [her daughter] being treated less than her peers, being bullied in school. And say if she's in Irish dancing or if she's in football or boxing or whatever it is my child wants to do, that if it's a competitive game or a competitive sport that somebody will just be nasty to her and call her a knacker or a pikey or something. I don't want Billie growing up in that kind of environment, but I want her to be proud of who she is. (Hogan, 2020)

Covid-19 has brought serious challenges to an already stretched ECEC sector. Those living in marginalisation, such as Travellers and those in Direct Provision, have been especially affected. Just because racism is not visible in a setting does not mean it's not present. Minister Roderic O'Gorman and the Department for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration have the responsibility and capacity to create change for those who are marginalised and often silenced. A first step is to recognise and pro-actively support the mainstreaming of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobic, and anti-ableism training for those for whom the Minister is responsible and seeks to serve.

Most importantly, this also applies to the early childhood sector. Because this work is about alleviating human suffering, there is a moral requirement on us all to begin and continue critical engagement with these issues. The social imperative for those who hold the power, make the rules, and distribute the funds is to create change through leadership, strategic planning, and resourcing for implementation. The Minister has a unique opportunity to use his brief to do just that and create meaningful change, starting with early childhood.

“ECEC educators are in an ideal position to make a positive difference in the lives of all children and their families.”

In the forthcoming Workforce Development Plan for the ECEC sector, it is imperative that mandatory diversity and equality training, including a critical pedagogical approach, be mainstreamed in both continuous professional development and pre-service education. There is now an opportunity to fully implement this work in early childhood. It is necessary, and ECEC educators are in an ideal position to make a positive difference in this critical area and to the lives of all children and their families.

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ENDNOTES

1. Doreen Reynolds was a strong advocate for an anti-bias approach in early childhood in Ireland. She left us too early, shortly after she gave me her paper for the conference proceedings. May she rest in peace.

“The whole world is like the human body with its various members. Pain in one member is felt in the whole body.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

PINE FOREST ART CENTRE

Set in the Dublin Mountains amidst beautiful scenery, for 40 years now Pine Forest Art Centre has been providing camps and courses for children and young people which combine creativity with fun.

Summer Courses for 5-16 year olds,
Schools Activity Days from March to June,
Halloween Workshops,
Christmas Workshops,

Easter Courses,
Portfolio Preparation Courses,
Birthday Parties,
Parent/Adult and Child Art Activity mornings.



Summer Camps

The Centre runs two-week summer camps during July and August for children aged 5-12 years and teenagers aged 13-16 years. Activities are many and varied - participants paint, sculpt, sketch, make pottery and clay items, weave, do batik and paper crafts.

Portfolio Preparation

There is also a Portfolio Preparation course during the summer for young people aged 16-19 years. This course is provided with a view to helping young people organise and expand portfolios with Art College and /or Leaving Cert in mind.

Courses during the year

The Centre runs courses during the Halloween, Christmas and Easter Holidays. Birthday Parties and Team building events.

School Groups Activity Days

School Art and Craft activity days are available from March to June.

Parent and Child Art & Craft Days

Held on the last Sunday of each month.

PINE FOREST ART CENTRE

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Primary²

Explorers Super Girl

Grace Gavin, aged 6, from Scoil Shéamais Noafa, Barna, Co Galway, takes action against Climate Change as part of a national writing and art competition launched early in 2020 by Explorers Education Programme.

Funded by the Marine Institute and supported by Camden Education Trust and the Galway Education Centre, the Explorers Education Programme provides an excellent opportunity for children to come up with creative solutions to climate change and its effects on the ocean.

Photo Andrew Downes @ XposureIreland





Before Covid (BC) and Altered Direction (AD)

Primary education reacts to a changed world



Damian White
President, Irish Primary Principals' Network

Primary education in Ireland has undergone sudden and radical change since March 2020. This article looks at how the issues and concerns for primary schools and the education partners supporting them changed dramatically with the closure and subsequent reopening of schools due to Covid-19.

The visual learners among us find 'before and after' photographs especially informative, particularly after a cataclysmic natural disaster or an unexpected explosion, such as that which changed the face of the beautiful port city of Beirut in August. Usually, the pre-event photo gives context to the extent of change represented in the post-event photo. It helps us to make sense of how lives are affected and of the work that faces those charged with restoring physical and psychological normality in its wake.

12 March 2020 was the date when such seismic changes came about in Irish education. While the full picture is yet to emerge, what is clear at the time of writing, autumn 2020, is that primary school as we knew it before March has changed utterly.

BC (Before Covid)

In the weeks and months leading up to 12 March, which we can call 'Before Covid', or BC, the primary school sector was most concerned with the imminent introduction of the frontloading model for the allocation of SNAs. Many school leaders feared that this was a system insufficiently trialled and thus highly likely to see schools short of the necessary supports in September 2020, despite assurances from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that an appeals system would be in place for exceptional cases.

Concern also persisted among school leaders following the NCSE's Croke Park conference, which explored the 'full inclusion' model of special needs support – known as the New Brunswick model after the first area to adopt it. Many in the education sector expressed grave concern as to how such a system would be rolled out in Ireland, and several articles and contributions from those in the small Canadian state, critical of the system's shortcomings, were in circulation. In Europe, only Portugal has so far adopted full inclusion as their approach to teaching children with special needs.

While attending the European School Heads Association (ESHA) conference in Lisbon in February, Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) Deputy CEO Pat Goff and I spent a day in a fully inclusive primary school in the suburb of Estoril. It was a very pleasant experience, and we had a chance to talk to several people in the school about how full inclusion works in reality. We concluded that, while the school we visited was excellent in every way, the supports available in terms of resources, funding, staff training, school meals, appropriate buildings, and access to professional support would require enormous investment from the Irish government – to the extent that it is impossible to envisage full inclusion being realistically implemented here. For example, the school, with approximately 250 children on roll, had a full-time psychologist and an occupational therapist shared with one other school.

It is also questionable whether such a model would be more successful than those employed throughout our special schools, which, in spite of insufficient funding and staffing, provide a very high-quality education and school experience for our most vulnerable children.

Reacting to Covid-19

The arrival of Covid-19 in Ireland led to drastic and unprecedented actions as the country fought to limit the spread of the dreaded virus. The closure of schools with immediate effect was one of several measures introduced to keep people apart and limit human contact. The country embraced the new limitations on liberty well, and the aim of 'flattening the curve' was introduced to help achieve it.

The closure of schools was so sudden that many schools didn't even have a chance to allow children to bring home their schoolbooks. Initially it was felt that the schools would close for two weeks only, but as the virus spread, schools' return date was pushed back until it naturally aligned with the summer holidays. From March to the end of June, schools played their part in the national effort by taking on new ways of supporting children's learning remotely, and by communicating by phone, email, and text and video messages to emotionally reassure children and their parents.

Schools preparing children for sacraments saw their dates pushed back, and ceremonies normally associated with the March–June period are now taking place in September–October. For confirmation candidates, this has provided one final formal link with their primary school, as candidates have all begun their second-level education since the end of August. Schools came up with memorable ways of staging graduation ceremonies in June for those at the end of their primary school journey.

All education partners worked with the Department throughout the summer holidays towards reopening schools in late August. To meet the social-distancing requirements set out in the HSE's pathway to reopening schools, there was huge restructuring in the layout of school buildings, provision of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), movement and storage of school furniture, and the appointment of extra cleaning

“Model ... employed throughout our special schools provides a very high-quality education and school experience for our most vulnerable children.”

“The closure of schools was so sudden that many schools didn't even have a chance to allow children to bring home their schoolbooks.”

staff. This meant that many principals and deputy principals worked 50–60 hours a week during their annual leave to have their schools ready.

The Department provided the necessary information piece-by-piece in July and August, eventually announcing a €375 million package to cover the costs of extra cleaning materials, PPE and building adjustment costs, and the preparation of isolation rooms, as well as a plan to create substitute panels to cover the expected vacancies as school staff self-isolate or visit Covid-19 test centres.

Thanks to the extraordinary work of school staff, particularly the school leaders, schools reopened successfully. Children embraced the new reality in schools with relief that at last they could meet their friends again, albeit in a more controlled environment. At the time of writing, however, four weeks into the new term, huge concerns remain. Schools reporting cases of Covid-19 to the HSE are finding it difficult to secure timely engagement with them to establish who they see as close contacts, to allow the process of contact tracing to begin. School leaders' difficulties around what to communicate, and with whom, are exacerbated by the speed at which news circulates through social media.

While the incidence of Covid-19 being transferred through school contacts is extremely low so far, most schools have situations where some staff members, students, or their parents or siblings have been tested. Where a positive case occurs, schools are aware of the protocols and have left the HSE to the job of contact tracing. In some cases, however, schools have had to ask 'pods' or 'bubbles' to isolate while awaiting confirmation from the HSE that this needs to happen.

Primary Education Forum

The Primary Education Forum (PEF) was established in 2018 to facilitate the exchange of information between the Department, agencies, teachers, school leaders, and managers. Because of Covid-19 restrictions, from 12 March onwards the Forum has met online only. Its aim is to support the planning and sequencing of change in schools and to look for opportunities for schools to streamline implementation and address workload issues. It follows feedback on the experience of implementing the Action Plan for Education, the DES's high-level work programme. The work of the Forum is consistent with the sort of approach proposed by Dr Karen Edge at IPPN's Annual Principals' Conference in January 2020.

Participation in the PEF is essential for partners seeking to influence the direction and pace of proposed changes. For example, as a result of the PEF, changes were made to two planned reforms around the Primary Maths Curriculum and implementation of certain provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. A similar partnership approach has been adopted to examine the issue of small schools through collaboration with the Forum. The work now under way seeks to build on this in a sustainable way by continuing to engage with key partners and the Department's Small Schools Steering Group to develop proposals to support and sustain small schools.

NCCA

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has been busy too. In February it published its Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, setting out the changes it had identified as necessary through widespread consultations with stakeholders, work carried out through schools, and other research. The draft document builds on the strengths and successes of the 1999 curriculum, while responding to challenges, changing needs, and new priorities. It gives schools more agency and flexibility on curriculum implementation, with blocks of time to be used at schools' discretion. The perception of curriculum overload is addressed by moving from eleven subjects to five broader curriculum areas.

It is foreseen that the New Curriculum, scheduled for implementation from September 2024, will bring a leaner and more integrated approach to children's learning. Seven key competencies will be embedded from junior infants to sixth class. After four years in the system, children will move towards a more subject-based approach from third class onwards, to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising learning.

The draft framework gives more time and prominence to well-being, introduces foreign languages from third class, broadens the area of Arts education, and increases the focus on technology. It also emphasises the importance of inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and play-based pedagogy, with assessment a central part of teachers' daily practice.

“ **The New Curriculum, scheduled for implementation from September 2024, will bring a leaner and more integrated approach to children's learning.** ”

CSL

Supporting school leaders through the pandemic quickly became one of the main strategic priorities for the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in the latter part of the 2019/20 school year. CSL mentors were a huge support to newly appointed school leaders, who faced unprecedented challenges this year. The CSL team undertook a review of the mentoring programme to improve its effectiveness and developed an online mentoring module for mentees to achieve a real understanding of the mentoring process. CSL's one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring support from IPPN and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), CSL's one-to-one and team coaching supports, and the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership (PDSL) are now, more than ever, an integral part of leadership in the Irish educational landscape.

Covid-19 challenged the system into new ways of working, and CSL, through engagement with stakeholders, offered insights into researched best practice and provided regular updates to school leaders on leadership in challenging times. CSL produced the 'Learning to Be a School Leader in Ireland' graphic, grounded in national and international research, which looks at leadership for each stage on the continuum and the elements of professional learning considered integral to leadership professional learning. The research undertaken on the elements of professional learning was used as a benchmark for the endorsement of professional learning provided by stakeholders in the system.

CSL opened two calls for providers to submit provision for endorsement, which has led to several leadership learning provisions being endorsed. This will support the Irish education system to provide the highest-quality professional learning for school leaders. The Centre further developed its work in the area of leadership professional learning by its collaboration with stakeholders in developing a one-stop calendar for school leaders, where they can access all leadership professional learning at the various stages on the continuum.

In keeping with the Department's vision of encouraging innovation and promoting excellence in leadership, CSL leads the 'Excellence through Collaborative Leadership and Management' initiative in conjunction with the DES, the Inspectorate, NAPD, IPPN, Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), and third-level and business representatives. Clusters of schools participated in a demonstration model designed to support projects that involve innovative approaches to school leadership and management. CSL continued to learn and collaborate with leadership centres in other jurisdictions to further inform the work of Irish school leaders.

PDST

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) continued its wide-ranging provision of support for school leaders and teachers throughout school closures. On the evening of 12 March, it launched its Distance Learning portal with timely and targeted supports for leadership, well-being, curriculum, and digital technologies, which all included tools to help schools navigate the new space, both online and offline. Online platforms allowed the team to maintain its connection with school leaders through its national programmes (Misneach, Forbairt, Meitheal) and to respond to the bespoke needs of school leaders through individual school support interactions.

“ **On the evening of 12 March (date of sudden closure of schools), PDST launched its Distance Learning portal with targeted supports for leadership, well-being, curriculum, and digital technologies.** ”

School leadership permeates the work of all PDST teams, with specific supports for leaders a particular priority for the PDST Digital Technologies, Health/Wellbeing, and Literacy /Numeracy teams, who work hand in hand with the PDST Leadership Team. During this time, the PDST website www.pdst.ie was populated with a wealth of new resources to help teachers and school leaders continue with the teaching, learning, and assessment of students. Each PDST team also developed a host of 'Learning Paths' on www.scoilnet.ie to help with planning and preparation of remote instruction.

The PDST's customised school support was in high demand at this time, reaching 8,800 school leaders and teachers during the closure period. The PDST were extremely pleased with the response to their Learning for All series of webinars, hosted in partnership with the Teaching Council, which explored current issues facing schools and harnessed some great learning from the magnificent efforts made by schools to adapt to these unprecedented circumstances.

For 2020/21, the PDST has a full schedule of offerings to support school leaders and teachers in all areas of leadership, teaching, and learning.

The Leadership Team has already engaged with over 140 newly appointed principals through Misneach and 200 newly appointed deputies as part of the new year-long Tánaiste programme. Both programmes will be reshaped and reimagined in the light of new challenges for school leaders, with the development of online professional communities being an additional component of each.

PDST's Comhar programme for middle leaders, which supported over 360 APIs and AP2s last year, will be expanded along with the PDST Meitheal, providing a facilitated professional learning community for experienced school leaders. PDST's Forbairt for leadership teams (Principal, Deputy, and another school leader) is already filling up.

PDST's Digital Technology team has produced a brand-new suite of supports for blended learning: www.pdst.ie/blendedlearning. It is also worth visiting the team's YouTube channel to view the catalogue of digital tool tutorials (search for 'PDST Digital Technologies'). PDST STEM and Languages teams have webinars ready to go, exploring the Primary Language Curriculum, Maths, and Science with innovative approaches for play and inquiry-based learning in the changed classroom and school environment. See: <https://pdst.ie/primary/literacy/webinars> and <https://pdst.ie/PrimarySTEM>. The PDST's Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery programmes also continue for hundreds of schools. Finally, PDST's contextualised and bespoke support for all school leaders and teachers is now taking applications on <https://pdst.ie/schoolsupport>.

Special education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has been conducting a review of special school and special class education. The extent of new classes being opened in recent years comes in the wake of high demand for places. Schools' willingness to open special classes in mainstream schools has been tempered with concerns over whether they will be adequately supported once established.

“After 12 March... learning through digital technology became not just essential but in many ways the only means of accessing education.”

While significant challenges remain, much progress has been made, with 167 new special classes opening for the 2019/20 school year. The DES prefers that schools engage voluntarily with this challenge of opening special classes to support the children in their community, although the Minister does have powers to address situations where there is a lack of places available.

Digital strategy for schools

The Department's current policy for the effective use of digital technologies in teaching and learning is set out in the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020, which is currently being implemented. The Strategy promotes the embedding of digital technologies in all classroom and school activity so that its use becomes a seamless part of the education experience, including all aspects of teacher education and continuous professional development.

After 12 March, when schools, almost without warning, were closed and wouldn't reopen until September, learning through digital technology

dramatically became not just essential but in many ways the only means of accessing education. Schools which up to then had differing levels of experience with remote learning now had to engage with it as the only way they could interact with pupils.

“The Education Centre network played a huge role in providing online courses for teachers.”

Most used the Seesaw platform, through which they could set and correct work remotely as pupils and staff alike adjusted to an entirely new way of teaching and learning. Classes, staff meetings, and board meetings were held using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or other apps that allowed people to interact, share files, and break into subgroups. The Education Centre network played a huge role in providing online courses for teachers to help them deal with digital learning methods, challenges, and opportunities.

Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill

The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 was published in September. While it had completed consideration by Seanad Éireann in December, further progress has been delayed due to the change of government and the subsequent pandemic. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) on behalf of the management bodies and IPPN shared serious concerns about the bill, which all felt didn't acknowledge the responsibilities of all parties equally.

If we have ever before described a school year as 'strange', the criteria for making such judgements have now moved. A famous Irish politician once used the phrase 'grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre, and unprecedented' in describing a series of odd events and the knock-on effects. Another politician abbreviated it to 'GUBU'. Neither of those articulate people lived to see the effects of Covid-19, but they would surely have saved their best expletives to describe its effect on the world. Hopefully, 2021 will be less GUBU than 2020.

“The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one who gets people to do the greatest things.”

– Ronald Reagan,
40th president of the United States

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* for public consultation in February 2020 as part of its review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. This article presents the key proposals for a redeveloped curriculum contained in the draft framework, and describes the reconfigured consultation process during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

2020 saw the publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as part of the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum. Though greatly overshadowed by Covid-19, it is a significant step in giving stakeholders an opportunity to have their say in shaping a redeveloped primary curriculum.

This article begins by outlining six key messages about the draft framework, then describes the three complementary strands of NCCA's consultation: Fieldwork, Communications, and Stakeholder Engagement, all of which have been impacted by Covid-19.

Draft Primary Curriculum Framework: Key messages

The draft framework is framed around a set of six key messages which, taken together, represent the main features and significant changes proposed for the redeveloped primary curriculum. These are outlined below.

1. *Building on strengths and responding to challenges*

The draft framework seeks to build on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum. These include teachers' increased use of active learning methodologies, children's enhanced enjoyment of learning, and improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics, and science, as evidenced in national and international assessments.

Simultaneously, the draft framework responds to key challenges identified by schools, such as curriculum overload and using assessment in a meaningful way to inform teaching and learning. Taking account of strategies, initiatives, and programmes from the last number of years, the draft framework proposes priorities for children's learning during the eight years of primary education.

Primary Curriculum Review

Consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework



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2. *Agency and flexibility for schools*

The draft framework proposes increased agency and flexibility for schools, recognising the variety of school contexts and providing for learning environments that support the learning of every child. Within this, teachers' and school leaders' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their school context are foregrounded. Proposals on time allocations and curriculum structure aim to increase flexibility for schools in planning and timetabling, allowing them to respond to their own priorities and opportunities.

3. *Supporting connections*

The draft framework supports transitions between primary school and home, preschool and post-primary school. It provides a vision for children's learning across the eight years of primary school, which links with learning experiences provided through the themes of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and connects with the subjects, key skills, and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015).

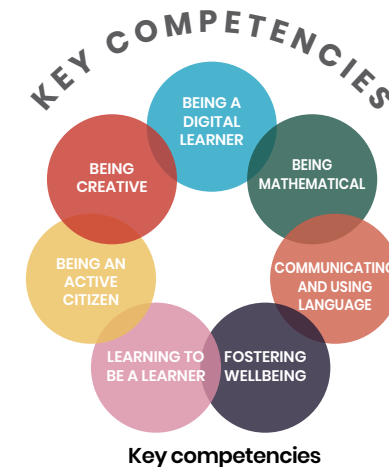
Acknowledging that children come to primary school with a rich and varied set of learning experiences, the draft framework aims to build on such learning as children progress through primary school and move to post-primary school. It supports educational transitions, a topic covered

by Dr Thomas Walsh in his article in the Early Childhood section of this Yearbook.

4. *Emerging priorities for children's learning*

The draft framework responds to priorities that have emerged for children's learning over the past two decades. It offers proposals that are responsive to such priorities, including giving more time and prominence to well-being; introducing new areas such as modern foreign languages from third class, and Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics; broadening the arts education area; and increasing the focus on technology.

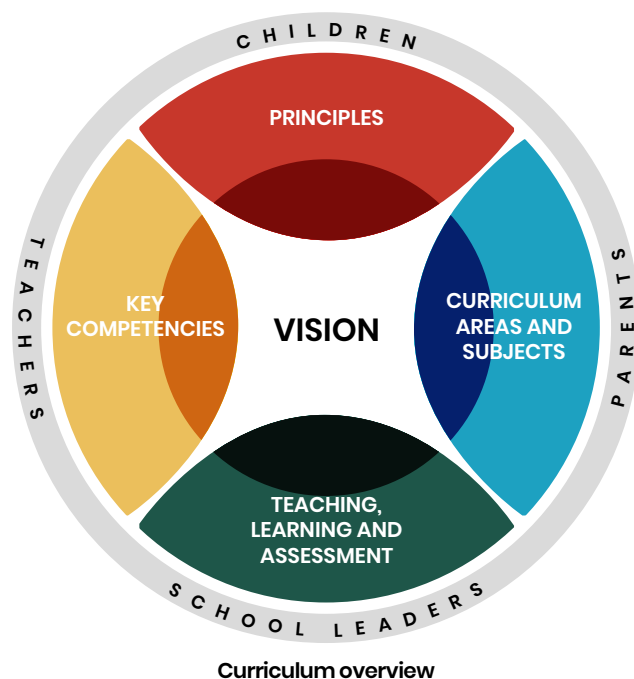
“The draft framework proposes priorities for children's learning during the eight years of primary education.”



The draft framework contains seven key competencies, which extend beyond skills and knowledge to also take account of dispositions, attitudes, and values that will enable children to adapt and deal with a range of situations and challenges (see Key Competencies image). It proposes embedding these competencies in learning outcomes in all curriculum areas and subjects.

5. Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The draft framework proposes a change in the curriculum's structure and presentation (see Curriculum Overview image). Moving from subjects to broad curriculum areas in the first four years of primary school seeks to support a more integrated approach to teaching and learning. Five broad curriculum areas are proposed: Language; Mathematics, Science and Technology Education; Wellbeing; Social and Environmental Education; and Arts Education.



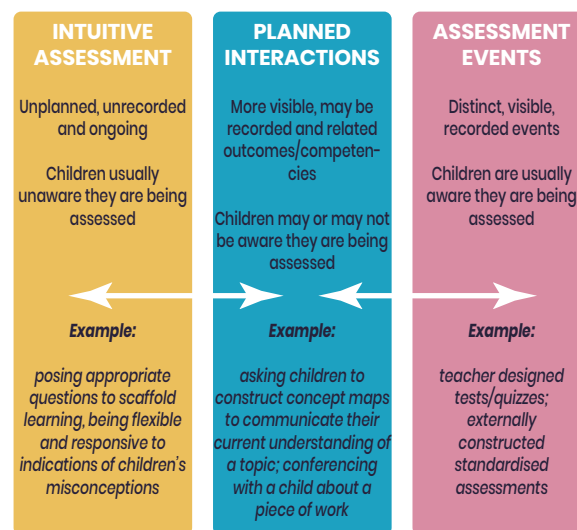
STAGES 1 AND 2 (JUNIOR INFANTS - 2 ND CLASS)	LANGUAGE (IRISH AND ENGLISH)	MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION	WELLBEING	ARTS EDUCATION*	SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION	RELIGIOUS/ETHICAL/MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME
STAGES 3 AND 4 (3 RD - 6 TH CLASS)	IRISH ENGLISH MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES	MATHEMATICS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY	PHYSICAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND VALUES EDUCATION	VISUAL ARTS MUSIC DRAMA (AND OTHER ASPECTS, E.G. DANCE, FILM, DIGITAL MEDIA)	HISTORY GEOGRAPHY	RELIGIOUS/ETHICAL/MULTI-BELIEF EDUCATION - PATRON'S PROGRAMME

Curriculum areas and subjects

* Broad learning outcomes in Art Education would continue to support learning in visual arts, music and drama, as well as supporting other aspects of arts education such as dance, film and digital media, and enabling schools to engage with local, national and international initiatives and opportunities. The learning outcomes would also support integrated learning experiences in stages 1-2. While disciplines within Arts Education have a common creative process and share transferable skills, each has its own knowledge, concept and skills. Subject specific learning outcomes in stages 3-4 alongside a set of broader outcomes overarching the subjects, would ensure children experience a broad and balanced Arts Education.

While these areas would become more differentiated into subjects from third class onwards, experiences and activities supporting children's learning across the curriculum would remain important. Further to the five areas, the Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron. It aims to contribute to the child's holistic development, particularly from the religious or ethical perspective, and in the process it underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school (see Curriculum Areas and Subjects image).

6. Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning



Continuum of assessment

The draft framework emphasises high-quality teaching, learning, and assessment. It highlights the importance of curriculum integration, inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and playful pedagogy. Assessment is conceptualised as an essential and central part of teachers' daily practice and is presented on a continuum ranging from 'intuitive' to 'planned interactions' to 'assessment events' (see Continuum of Assessment image). Assessment in the redeveloped curriculum draws on key ideas in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for*

Schools (NCCA, 2007) and supports the progression of each child towards the curriculum vision.

Importantly, the draft framework recognises the role and influence of parents and families in children's education. In placing significance on quality relationships and their impact on children's learning, it encourages teachers to make meaningful connections with children's interests and experiences.

Consultation: Three interconnected strands

A consultation process based on the six key messages was originally designed to run until the end of October. Following Covid-19 and the closure of schools and settings, this timeline was extended to the end of 2020. The impact of the pandemic on the education system will continue to be monitored closely, and adjustments will be made to the consultation's design and timeframe as needed.

Based on the current situation in late September, it is likely that a second consultation phase will take place in the 2021/22 school year. This two-phased approach is in direct response to the ongoing challenges facing school communities and indeed all education stakeholders, and to the necessity to engage meaningfully with and hear directly from teachers, children, parents, and school leaders in the consultation.

The consultation is structured around three interconnected strands of activity:

- Fieldwork
- Communications
- Stakeholder Engagement

The fieldwork strand aims to provide a way for anybody wishing to respond to the draft framework to do so. Options include questionnaires for both educators and parents, as well as written submission templates which are available on the NCCA website. The need to adapt the initial consultation plan to take account of evolving public health advice and challenges faced by the education system resulted in a significant amount of consultation activity moving online. For instance, information sessions and bilateral meetings with stakeholders have taken place online. Marino Institute of Education, on behalf of NCCA, will be carrying out a consultation with children on the key messages. Additional online materials for schools and preschools are available to support self-organised consultation workshops. Full consultation details are available at www.ncca.ie/primary.

The communications strand seeks to build awareness across the education system and the public generally. This is supported through the availability of different response formats, encouraging as wide an engagement as possible. Three messages underpin the communications strand:

“ Assessment is conceptualised as an essential and central part of teachers' daily practice.

- the directions for change in the redeveloped primary curriculum – essentially, answering the question, *What's different compared to the 1999 curriculum?*
- the processes involved in reviewing the curriculum and developing the draft framework
- the promotion of different ways people can contribute to the consultation.

To maximise reach and impact, communication strategies and tools are tailored to reach different audiences. A dedicated consultation section is provided on the NCCA website which presents all consultation materials and tools for users. Print and broadcast media along with a social media campaign have featured news items on the consultation. A series of e-bulletins highlight key milestones in the curriculum review process, while partner networks also support the dissemination of information.

Reflecting research and literature on curriculum change, NCCA is collaborating with partners in education to identify opportunities and challenges that arise during times of change. To support this stakeholder engagement work, a series of 'Leading Out' seminars have been organised to support coordinated and purposeful planning for introducing the redeveloped curriculum. Topics such as supporting teacher agency, professional development, and policy alignment are under consideration.

“ A dedicated consultation section is provided on the NCCA website which presents all consultation materials and tools for users.

Supporting this process is the work of an international advisory panel, which includes Professor Louise Hayward (University of Glasgow), Professor James Spillane (Northwestern University), Professor Dominic Wyse (University College London), and Dr Thomas Walsh (Maynooth University). Established in early 2020 by NCCA, the panel engages in collective discussion and deliberation while providing important insights and observations based on their experience and expertise.

In conclusion

The consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* is the first time in over twenty years that teachers, school leaders, children, parents, management bodies, patrons, the wider education sector, and the general public have had an opportunity to consider the primary curriculum as a whole, and its interface with *Aistear* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Unsurprisingly, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health advice has required that the consultation be reoriented. It has required a move to online platforms for engagement and data gathering, with the cancellation of all face-to-face arrangements. While the means of consulting and the timeline are different from the original plan, the consultation is ongoing, and NCCA will continue to monitor and adjust plans in the hope that everyone wishing to have their voice heard during the consultation will be able to do so.

In the rapidly changing landscape of early childhood education in Ireland, this article looks at how to develop continuity in curriculum and pedagogy in progressing children's communication, language, and literacy skills as they transition from early learning and care settings to primary school.

The landscape of early childhood has changed significantly for Irish children in the last decade. 2019 marked the tenth anniversary of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Both were significant catalysts for change in Irish education. This article explores how their potential is being realised in the development of children's capacity and skills in communication, language, and literacy. It considers the features of effective classroom pedagogy that develop children's capacity and core skills while building on their prior learning experiences in the home and in early learning and care (ELC) settings.

Early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning. Immersion in high-quality early learning experiences that encompass play, social interaction, communication, language, thinking, and problem-solving skills is critical for later learning and development. Aistear regards play as a key methodology that underpins a holistic learning experience for our youngest learners. Significantly, it emphasises an appropriate balance between adult-led and child-led activities. Both Aistear and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) 2019 identify that children's development and learning are best supported through engaging experiences that are mediated by skilled adults. These experiences are thoughtfully curated to stimulate and build on children's innate curiosity and interest in understanding the world around them.

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (DCYA, 2018) recognises the importance of continuity in curriculum and pedagogy in progressing the learning of children as they transition from ELC settings to primary school. Positive transitions in education have been identified as an important predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional, and educational outcomes (NCCA, 2016). A school's readiness to accept a child is much more significant than the child's readiness to start school (Clarke, 2016).

Effective Practice in Progressing Communication, Language, and Literacy

Developing continuity in curriculum and pedagogy from early years to primary education



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Many junior-infant teachers have identified the need to adjust their pedagogical practice from an emphasis on the subject content of children's learning to a more nurturing, play-based, and integrated approach so as to ease children's transition to school (Hayes, 2008). Teachers increasingly use *Mo Scéal* transition materials to gain insights into children's prior learning and achievements.¹ This supports planning and contributes to greater coherence in learning. Teachers are also looking to the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) for inspiration in providing child-centred, playful learning experiences. Many have engaged in summer courses and other programmes of learning on play-based pedagogy while anticipating the finalisation of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020).²

The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) 2019 supports the positive dispositions towards language and literacy developed at home and in preschool. Learning outcomes for the infant classes reflect Aistear's principles, while the use of the phrase 'Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to ...' indicates that a playful approach to language learning is required. An online toolkit, including materials such as *Infusing Playfulness into Language Learning and Teaching*, provides support for teachers' practice. Among the features of the PLC in practice that extend children's communication, language, and literacy skills are the following:

- Playful, child-led learning experiences

Playful learning makes a major contribution to the development of language and provides rich opportunities for reading and writing (NCCA, 2019). Child-led, playful learning facilitates children to have a greater say in planning learning activities. This in turn supports motivation, confidence, and positive learning dispositions. Playful teachers inspire confidence in their pupils. They follow children's interests, adopting a 'have a go' attitude, which children enjoy.

“ Positive transitions
in education have
been identified as an
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children's future success.

As language is closely linked with thinking, feeling, imagination, and innovation, there is a high awareness of the importance of fostering these competencies. Role-play scenarios provide a purpose for children to develop early literacy skills, including writing shopping lists, reading menus, and collecting passenger information, for example. By getting involved in children's play and acting as a scribe, the teacher can capture children's imaginative stories and read these back to the children, thereby fostering a love of language that can be sustained throughout schooling and into adulthood.

- Talk and rich language input

The importance of early childhood experiences, with rich language input and appropriate exposure to the use and functions of print, is widely recognised (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). Modelling and extending language, introducing new vocabulary, and promoting emergent reading and writing skills are of critical importance in both English and Irish. The PLC envisages children as confident communicators, having fun with language in classrooms that are places of talk, creating stories, reciting

rhymes, and singing songs frequently throughout the day. A classroom song/rhyme book with illustrations allows children to choose poems to recite or songs to sing.

Encouraging children to create and record their own rhymes and stories supports phonological and phonemic awareness and provides opportunities for creative language learning. Teachers tune in to children's interests; they talk to them and extend and develop their language registers. They add rich, unusual vocabulary and discuss the meanings of words, their synonyms and antonyms. Regular use of open-ended questioning stimulates critical thinking and encourages fluency of speech.

- Reading aloud

Reading aloud high-quality books to children is an extremely valuable exercise. It gives them opportunities to hear more complex syntax than that used in typical conversations (Dickinson and Morse, 2019). Reading aloud is important not just for establishing nurturing relationships and developing language and a love of books and reading, but also for sensitising children to features of written language through print (Clark, 2016, p. 133). The most effective way for young children to become familiar with high-frequency words is to see them in print in a story, as it is easier for them to negotiate words in context (*ibid.*, p. 134). Dialogic, dynamic, and interactive reading, where the teacher engages the children in conversation during the reading, supports prediction, recall, and visualisation and helps children to listen attentively and make connections with the real-life experiences.

- Creative environments

The role of early years educators in recognising and developing opportunities for creativity in learning is very significant. Creative, print-rich environments can stimulate young children learning to read and write (Clark, 2016). Resources such as photo and word labels, a daily routine chart, a jobs board, signs, and a message board support early literacy skills. A book-rich cosy corner with a wide range of reading materials, including catalogues, fact books, manuals, comics, and homemade books, promotes conversations and the handling of books and encourages children's attempts at reading independently or to their peers and teacher. A variety of drawing and writing tools, digital devices, and magnetic whiteboards, when freely available, encourage early writing skills.

- Thematic approaches

Thematic approaches help children to make meaningful connections in their learning, giving them an opportunity to draw on multiple sources of knowledge and skills (NCCA, 2020). In observing the children at play, the teacher listens to them, converses with them about what they are doing, follows their lead, and identifies their interests. This allows the teacher to introduce new vocabulary relating to a topic that emerges from children's interests – a powerful way of developing language.

Teachers increasingly use Mo Scéal transition materials to gain insights into children's prior learning and achievements.

A topic-based approach also supports curriculum integration. For example, by engaging in a language theme around travel, learning can be easily extended into the second language, and into Social, Environmental and Scientific Education to learn about people and places in other countries. The children can learn songs and listen to music from other cultures. In Visual Arts, children can interpret the travel theme in drawings, clay, and mixed-media collage. In Social, Personal and Health Education, they can explore how to appreciate cultural differences and learn how to treat others with dignity and respect. The possibilities are endless and make for creative, challenging, and enjoyable learning experiences.

- Promoting multilingualism

Citizenship is an important goal of education at all stages. As the social fabric of our country is enriched by newcomer families who bring many languages and exciting cultures and heritages to classrooms, the potential for children to be multilingual has never been greater. Representing and exploring home languages is a wonderful way to develop an appreciation of many cultures. In capitalising on this rich language resource, teachers can expose children to rhymes, songs, and greetings in other languages and introduce stories and children's books from other cultures. Such active language acquisition has enormous potential to build on learners' receptive language capacities, facilitate the transfer of language skills, and support the learning of Irish.

Looking forward

In conclusion, let us consider what is required at the system level to further progress communication, language, and literacy learning from early years to primary education. In the first instance, young children require professional, nurturing practitioners and teachers who believe that the possibilities for language learning are truly endless. There is a key role for our higher education institutions in preparing educators to mediate creative learning experiences and to progress higher-order literacy skills.

Bringing early years practitioners and primary teachers together in central and local networks for joint professional learning activities in communication, language, and literacy learning would build strong connections between the sectors. This in turn should facilitate professional conversations about the children's language dispositions and skills, and these insights will ease transition to primary school.

Progressing language and cultural awareness enables and supports multilingualism and will also help to create Irish citizens who have an appreciation for linguistic diversity, increased acceptance of cultural difference, and better understanding of and empathy for each other.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Mo Scéal* templates provide an opportunity for Early Years practitioners to tell the story of the child's interests, strengths, and challenges. The reports are shared with parents and with the child's primary school, with parental consent.
2. Summer course provision for primary teachers in *Aistear: Play, Literacy and Numeracy* has been provided by the Association of Teachers/Education Centres in Ireland in collaboration with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

New Solar Panels for Clontuskert School



Students at St Augustine's National School, Clontuskert, Co Galway, in front of newly installed solar panels sponsored by Microsoft SSE Airtricity and Activ8.

The Use of Digital Technologies in Distance Learning during School Closures

This article looks at primary and post-primary schools' experience of using digital technologies during school closures. It considers what we have learned and makes proposals on how we can build on this learning in the future.

Primary and post-primary schools closed with less than twenty-four hours' notice in March 2020. They had very little time to put plans in place to ensure continuity of teaching and learning for their students while they were at home. School leaders and teachers were thrust into an entirely new experience of working and engaging remotely with students and parents. Technology played a crucial role in ensuring that schools and teachers continued to connect with their students, enabling them to progress in their learning. In many instances, schools and teachers adapted very well. In other instances, they found it difficult at first but adapted to the challenge over time.

This article looks at the experience of schools in this new context, considers what we have learned about the use of technology, and makes proposals on how we can build on this learning in the future. It draws on information gathered by the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) Inspectorate as it engaged with school principals during the school closure and presents data from a survey of parents carried out by the Department in collaboration with the National Parents Council Primary. It also draws on studies done by national research and academic institutions.

A new level of digital competency

The sudden closure of schools meant that teachers had to adapt quickly to distance learning. This led to an unprecedented use of digital technologies and necessitated a new level of digital competency for teachers and students. Schools and teachers used digital technologies in many ways, including to communicate with their pupils, facilitate live or recorded lessons, assign work, and provide learners with feedback.

Teachers also used digital technologies and school learning platforms to support and monitor children's engagement with learning. Digital technologies played a really important role in helping learners stay connected with their teachers and classmates. The innovation shown by teachers during school closure has demonstrated



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the significant potential of digital technologies to enhance students' learning.

Varied use of digital technologies

Since its publication in 2015, the Digital Strategy for Schools has underpinned the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning, and assessment. While many schools have developed strong application of digital technologies, practice varies considerably. During the school closure, use of digital technologies ranged from simply setting tasks and assigning work, to giving feedback on work and providing recorded or live lessons. Some schools found the transition somewhat easier, while for others it took time to adjust and put arrangements in place.

There were also differences between primary and post-primary schools. Many post-primary schools had pre-existing infrastructure in place that allowed them to adapt more quickly. Primary schools found it more challenging, at least initially. The Inspectorate's discussion with principals suggests that asynchronous learning was more common at primary level and appeared to be the most practically suitable arrangement at the time and the most appropriate for the age cohort involved.

Email and platforms that facilitate sharing of digital portfolios of work were reported to be the most frequent modes of engagement between school and home. Synchronous learning was a stronger feature in post-primary schools, with more frequent use of videos and real-time interactive learning experiences from the outset. The capacity to provide video or live lessons increased in primary schools and became a more extensive feature during the school closure.

The DES surveys of parents (2020) indicated varying practice in teachers' provision of feedback to students and pupils, particularly in the initial period of school closures. 63% of the 1,806 parents of post-primary students who responded agreed that their children received regular and practical feedback from their teacher on work completed, while only 43% of 8,053 parents of primary pupils did so.

Factors affecting the use of digital technologies

A range of interrelated factors impacted on the use of digital technologies in schools. These related to schools, learners, or infrastructure.

A key school-related factor was the capacity to deploy digital technology already in the school (Inspectorate, DES, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020). Schools that had already embraced whole-school approaches and had well-established practices for the use of digital technologies, together with the necessary infrastructure, were in a better position to support students' learning in the remote environment. Schools that had not embedded digital technologies in their teaching and learning practice found it much more challenging to do so. While some moved quickly to develop their infrastructure, others did not fully exploit the potential of digital technologies.

Teacher confidence and competence in digital learning were also important school-based factors. Teachers varied considerably in their experience, confidence, and ability to use digital technologies to support learning. Supports from the Teacher Education Centre network and the extensive suite of customised CPD supports and training modules facilitated by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provided very valuable guidance and helped to upskill teachers.

Learner-related factors included learner confidence and competence in digital learning and the level of learner access to digital technologies and reliable broadband (Inspectorate, DES, 2020). Where there was a lack of learner and parent familiarity with applications or platforms, this greatly constrained the use of digital technologies by children to engage with their teachers or the learning tasks provided. This issue was less acute in schools with existing digital learning platforms or applications, as learners were already familiar with the technologies. Other schools sent links or made short videos to help parents and learners access and use them.

Access to devices and to broadband was an important factor affecting the use of digital technologies (Devitt et al., 2020). Learners living in areas with inadequate broadband connectivity or with limited access to devices experienced difficulties engaging with the online materials or activities that their teachers were providing. Many schools provided devices to their students as one way of overcoming the obstacles of distance learning. Other schools invested significant effort in reaching out to their communities and made local arrangements to deliver and collect learners' work. This enabled the schools to maintain valuable two-way communication with the learners.

“ Supports from the Teacher Education Centre network and the PDST provided very valuable guidance and helped to upskill teachers. ”

Practical considerations of infrastructure limited the choices available to some schools and teachers for distance learning. In a study by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Mohan et al., 2020), almost half of second-level school leaders reported that home-broadband connectivity and access to ICT devices for students significantly constrained how schools responded during school closure. Second-level schools with catchments where there was lower coverage of high-speed broadband were less likely to use online teaching and learning. Similarly, over half of primary principals who responded to a survey carried out on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network considered issues of pupils' access to broadband when deciding on distance-learning provision (Burke and Dempsey, 2020).

Vulnerable students were most affected

Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs were most likely to be impacted during the period of school closure (Mohan et al., 2020). This reflects the experience in other countries. The DES's investment in technology and resource supports for disadvantaged and at-risk learners aimed to ensure that the disruption to learning would not exacerbate differences in achievement and progression between those who are advantaged and those who are disadvantaged.

Even in schools where ICT infrastructure and access to devices was not an issue, students at risk of disadvantage appeared to be most adversely

affected, with their levels of engagement with teachers declining over the school closure period. Principals who spoke to inspectors during this time were deeply concerned about the educational welfare and well-being of these students. Of particular concern was the lack of engagement of some Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students, despite the best efforts of schools and teachers to connect with them.

In the case of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the lack of access to devices and to high-speed broadband exacerbated the impact that school closure had on them – hence the Department’s significant investment to improve access to devices in those school communities. However, it is recognised that the period of school closures has highlighted the digital divide experienced by students from lower-income families or who lived in areas that have been designated as socially and economically disadvantaged (Burke and Dempsey, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

Going forward

The period of school closure has highlighted the vital social role that our schools play in society and the invaluable role they play in the socialisation of our children. Without doubt, there is a greater appreciation of the work and skills of teachers and the central role they play in nurturing the well-being of children and young people. While there were many notable successes associated with schools’ use of digital technologies to support and stay connected with students during the period of school closure, it was clear that the use of technology for distance learning was not a substitute for the classroom.

“Any lack of learner and parent familiarity with applications or platforms greatly constrained the use of digital technologies by children.”

We have learned a lot about the potential of technology at a time of change and uncertainty. We have also learned that technology has its limitations even when deployed effectively. The challenge now is to leverage the additional digital learning experience, knowledge, and skills gained by schools and teachers as they responded to the crisis to embed the use of digital technologies to make students’ learning more effective.

We also need to address teacher-related, student-related, and infra-structural factors that constrained the use of technology in the teaching and learning experience during the school closure. In doing so, we should consider:

- the need to make digital learning accessible and equally available to all learners, particularly those at risk of disadvantage
- the need to ensure that all our teachers have the necessary confidence, knowledge, and skills to use digital technologies to enrich teaching and learning, including assessment and giving feedback
- the need to better prepare all teachers to use digital technologies to support student-driven learning, which in turn will facilitate continuity of learning when distance learning is required
- the need to support school leaders on how to lead and manage whole-school use of digital technologies.

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New Chief Executive Officer for Educate Together



In February 2020 Emer Nowlan replaced Paul Rowe as Chief Executive Officer of Educate Together. Commenting on her appointment, Emer said:

“I am delighted to be appointed as Educate Together’s next CEO. Huge progress has been made in equality-based education over the past 20 years... Demand for Educate Together’s equality-based schools has never been greater, and I look forward to working with families, students, campaigners, educators and our partners across the sector to meet that demand.”

The pandemic has serious implications for child poverty. There are lessons to be learned from the last economic crash, when child poverty in Ireland soared at the fastest rate in Europe. Will history repeat itself, or will the Irish state take the necessary measures to protect its most vulnerable children? This article explores the issue through the lens of one DEIS school in Dublin.

Over the past decade, Ireland has had one of the sharpest decreases in early school leaving in the EU, going below our national ET2020 (Education and Training 2020) target of 8% and the EU target of 10% (Donlevy et al., 2019). The impact of the Covid-19 lockdown threatens to dismantle this progress.

A first major concern is the impact on child poverty of the economic crisis generated by Covid-19 and the series of lockdowns. There is a clear lesson to be learned from the previous economic crash after the banking crisis. Between 2008 and 2011, child poverty soared in Ireland at the fastest rate in Europe.

The AROPE indicator ('at risk of poverty or social exclusion') is the share of the population who are either (1) at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold, (2) in a situation of severe material deprivation, or (3) living in a household with a very low work intensity.

From 2008 to 2011, the AROPE for children rose in twenty-one EU member states. According to Eurostat, the largest increases in AROPE since 2008 were in Ireland (up 11 percentage points up to 2010) and Latvia (10.4), followed by Bulgaria (7.6), Hungary (6.2), and Estonia (5.4). In other words, in the last economic crash, Ireland placed the burden of poverty most substantially on its children – more than any other country in Europe. Far from being an inevitable consequence of the recession, this was a clear policy choice.

Equally concerning are the official child poverty statistics from the Irish Department of Social Protection, which show the extensive acceleration of child poverty between 2011 and 2014 (see diagram).

Child Poverty and Mental Health in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Supports in DEIS schools and the need for a national strategic response



Paul Downes
Director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre, and Associate Professor at DCU



Niamh Murray
Principal of Rutland St. National School, Dublin (DEIS 1)

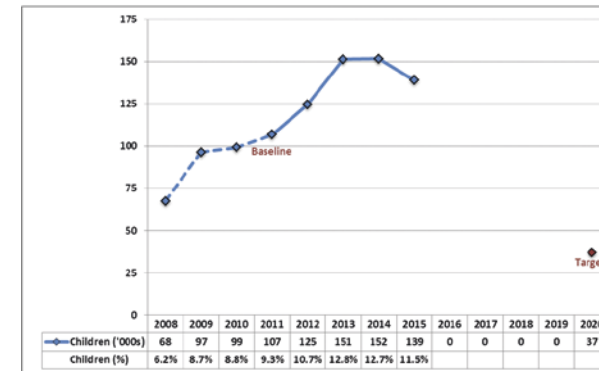


Diagram 1: Process on the child-specific social target.
Source: SILC, various years

While there were some improvements in child poverty rates in 2017 and 2018, the question now arises as to whether history will repeat itself – or will the Irish state take proactive efforts to protect its children from the poverty impact of the recession induced by the pandemic?

One promising indication that a different policy response to child poverty will take place in this decade is the explicit commitment in the Programme for Government 2020 to 'Continue to review and expand the roll-out of the new Hot School Meals initiative'. This vital initiative has been followed through in the October 2020 budget commitment of an additional €5.5 million for hot meals in schools for 35,000 more children nationally.

However, there needs to be a much more substantial financial commitment to expand this across DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and other schools nationally, so that it is not simply a hit-and-miss approach depending on which schools can or cannot avail of this national scheme. There is also the issue of hot meal provision for families in poverty and outside of school times, such as holiday periods. This all needs to be part of a wider national strategic approach to face up to the crisis of child poverty in light of Covid-19.

The pandemic is exacerbating the trauma and adversity impacting on the mental health of our children and young people, including the additional emotional and financial strain of lockdown on so many families. This requires heightened awareness among policymakers about a strategic gap in supports in Irish schools that puts Ireland out of step with many European countries: the lack of emotional counsellors or therapists in and around every school.

A recent report on early school leaving, published by the EU Commission, recognises that 'Emotional counselling and support is provided in a range of countries in order to help those suffering from serious emotional distress, including the Czech Republic, Belgium and Germany' (Donlevy et al., 2019). It also notes: 'In France, all pupils have access to the Psychologist of Education for psychological support and career guidance. Emotional counselling is also available in Sweden, where all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost and in Slovenia.'

The report highlights:

In some countries, emotional counselling is expressly backed by legislation. In Poland, legislation mandates for the existence of a system of support to students who are having significant difficulties at school,

in the form of one-to-one academic tutoring and psychological support where required. ... In Denmark, legislation states that school leaders can choose to recommend a student for pedagogical-psychological assessment, the results of which may initiate a process where the student may receive psychological support. Croatia and Bulgaria also have legislation in place that provides for emotional counselling and psychological support.

Emotional counselling and therapeutic supports, such as play and art therapy, need to be available in all DEIS schools, and arguably beyond, to provide at least one key limb of support against the mental health strain and trauma experienced by so many of our children. Ireland is radically out of step with many European countries who provide these services in schools.

This is not addressed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or by career guidance increases, because neither one provides or is suitable to provide ongoing individual therapeutic supports for trauma and complex emotional needs. The teacher as ‘one good adult’ in the government’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018) is no substitute for qualified emotional counsellors or therapists.

Many DEIS schools provide play therapy, but this is ad hoc, funded by a mixture of corporate sources, some limited School Completion funding, or voluntary therapeutic placements. Now is the optimum time for the Department of Education and Skills to fund a much-needed service for children. Play and art therapy and emotional counselling supports can build on the Draft Programme for Government’s commitment to ‘Improve access to supports for positive mental health in schools’ and would be a fitting post-pandemic legacy for our children.

In Dublin’s North East Inner City, at least 25% of children in primary schools did not engage in distance learning. From speaking to school principals, we know this is the case across DEIS schools and is even higher in certain areas. From conversations with parents, we know there is a myriad of reasons for non-engagement, including parents not coping with a child’s behaviour, or poor parental mental health. Some children have parents with addiction issues and are in the care of grandparents who may not be tech savvy.

Every school is different, and every school experience is different. Even across the ten schools in the North East Inner City, the demographics vary greatly. This piece captures one school at a moment in time. The most striking aspect of the return to school is that the children are really delighted to be back and have settled in very well after being out of their routines for so long. As we contemplated the return, this had been our biggest concern. The smooth transition is testament to the teachers who work in DEIS schools, who are keenly aware of the significance of the pupil-teacher relationship.

We were fortunate in Rutland NS to experience no staff turnover this year. There was minimal movement of teachers across schools – a positive impact of Covid-19 – so every teacher kept their class. This ensured a relatively

“ **One promising indication... is the explicit commitment in the Programme for Government 2020 to ‘Continue to review and expand the roll-out of the new Hot School Meals initiative’.** ”

“ **Emotional counselling and therapeutic supports, such as play and art therapy, need to be available in all DEIS schools, and arguably beyond.** ”

seamless transition, as the focus was on reconnecting and refamiliarisation, rather than September’s usual time spent establishing relationships with a new group of children.

Since the reopening, the segregation of classes on yard has vastly improved behaviour. Children whose behaviour on yard is less than ideal tend to gravitate towards similar children in another class yard, leading to inter-class conflict. Yard supervision is one of the most challenging aspects for teachers, particularly senior yard, where tempers can easily fray during football matches and arguments can erupt. This often has a knock-on impact on the classroom, as teachers can spend time after yard attempting to sort out inter-class issues, which takes from curriculum time.

Restorative practice, an evidence-based programme which is extremely worthwhile, is something we are attempting to introduce, but it is time-consuming. Reducing the potential for conflict is huge. This reduced stress for the teachers has a positive impact on their mental health.

For the children, too, having to stay with their own class is beneficial. Typically very vulnerable children with poor social skills gravitate towards the familiarity of siblings on yard and can be reluctant to make friends. With the new changes, they have to make friends.

It is too soon to make any academic pronouncements, but a few observational trends are apparent from class teachers, who tell us that in senior classes (fourth to sixth) there is a noticeable gap between those children who engaged in online learning during the closure and those who did not. The precise impact of this is not yet measurable. In the junior classes, the gap seems to be more attributable to the differences already evident between the children rather than to engagement during closure, but again it is early days.

Across the board, there are concerns about the reduction in children’s concentration and stamina levels. Regression in fine motor skills, namely handwriting, is also prominent; the nature of online learning means that these skills were under-utilised during the closure. Many children now need to rebuild their physical fitness after a more sedentary existence. Much of this is attributable to children spending more time online – playing computer games, using social media, and so on.

It will take time to fully recalibrate the skills necessary for the more traditional forms of learning in the classroom. Next May/June, when the annual standardised tests are completed, is when the true nature of the impact of closure on children’s learning will become apparent.

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2020 was a turbulent year for special education at primary level in Ireland, not all of it rooted in the Covid-19 pandemic. With special schools threatened with closure, a frontloading model for allocating special needs assistants, and a failure to open enough classes for children with autism, it has been a troubled year for the National Council for Special Education and a troubling year for pupils with additional needs, who could claim to have been forgotten in all of it.

2020 has been a year dominated by one subject, and as much as I love a challenge, writing an entire article about this year without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic would be impossible. However, if you were somebody involved in special education needs in Ireland, whether as a pupil, teacher, special needs assistant (SNA), or family member, you might be forgiven for wondering whether the education system had forgotten about your existence. Like every good story, we need to go back to a land far, far away, a long, long time ago, specifically 19 November 2019, pre-pandemic times.

The beginning of 2020 was dominated by the aftermath of a research conference run by the National Council of Special Education (NCSE, 2019a), titled Inclusive Education Systems & Teacher Education for Inclusion. There were a host of speakers, including Jody Carr, former Minister of Education in New Brunswick, Canada. Carr outlined a model of education he had introduced in his region, where all students in all schools, whatever their needs, learned in the same classrooms (Carr, 2019).

Ireland's then Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, appeared supportive of this model, stating, 'All of this investment is to try and ensure that children are educated in an inclusive setting as far as practicable. Each child should be educated with their peers in mainstream wherever feasible, and this is very much reflected in what the NCSE has stated in this progress report' (McHugh, 2019a). The conference set the tone for the anticipated direction of special educational needs provision into 2020, with the potential closure of special schools and the prospect of all school leaders facing the task of balancing the rights of families with the 'limited supports' (IPPN, 2019) available in schools.

Although these limited supports were not new, and in fact schools were receiving fewer supports, with 88.4% of principals claiming they had more

Full Inclusion, Frontloading and Forgotten Children

A Review of Special Education in Primary Level



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NS

SET allocations a decade ago (National Principals' Forum, 2019), these were being put under increasing pressure, with increased demands on the system.

With the full inclusion model in the background, a study by Trinity College Dublin, 'Exclusion in Education: A Study of Short School Days', was launched in February 2020 (TCD, 2020). It was highly critical of schools and their shortening of the school day for pupils with additional needs. Further pressure was imposed on a system already struggling to cope with the rising costs (NCSE, 2019b) of providing an adequate service for pupils with additional needs, and the resources needed to provide these supports (National Principals' Forum, 2019).

On top of this, a pilot project, the School Inclusion Model (NCSE, 2018), was gathering pace. In January, the plan was announced to frontload special needs assistants (DES, 2019), changing the application process to 'an allocation model under which schools are allocated posts under a new set of criteria' (FORSA, 2020). It was not met well by stakeholders, due to concerns that the NCSE would not provide adequate provisions for schools (National Principals' Forum, 2019); and given that the pilot had not concluded, the Irish Primary Principals' Network claimed that the 'rush to implement' the pilot would 'undermine the credibility' of it (IPPN, 2020). Even so, it seemed inevitable that this model would be put in place in time for September 2020.

“ Jody Carr outlined a model of education he had introduced in his region, where all students in all schools, whatever their needs, learned in the same classrooms. ”

However, on 12 March, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced that all schools would close due to Covid-19 (DES, 2020a), ultimately pressing the pause button on any projects or pilots for the rest of the year. As the education community found itself having to think of new ways to educate the children of the country, the pandemic was having a more pronounced effect on pupils with additional needs (Darmody, Smyth, and Russell, 2020). By the end of March, the Department of Education and Skills conceded that the frontloading model could not go ahead, and announced a temporary model that looked very similar.

Schools that believed they did not have enough resources to support their pupils could appeal their allocation. But according to a briefing document by Meet the Kids Behind the Cuts (2020), a campaign set up to highlight the lack of resources offered to children with additional needs, only 3% of appeals were likely to succeed, based on previous research.

With the pandemic continuing and schools remaining shut for the rest of the school year, attention fell on the July Provision scheme, a programme for children in special classes for autism or severe/profound needs. The plan was published less than three weeks before the beginning of July (DES, 2020b), renamed the Summer Education Programme, and expanded to include children with other types of diagnoses, which was welcome.

Attention during the summer focused on the reopening of school buildings for the 2020/21 year. However, this focus was deflected by news in south Dublin that there were not enough places in special classes for children with autism. Despite being raised in the Dáil as early as April 2019, by Jim

O'Callaghan, the shortage of school places was still not resolved by the NCSE by July, despite willingness from many schools to open these classes.

The new government that was formed in the middle of the pandemic announced the first ever Minister with responsibility for Special Education, Josepha Madigan, at the beginning of July (Fine Gael, 2020). However, when the guidelines for reopening schools were published at the end of the month, anyone involved in providing education for children with additional needs would have been disappointed to read the lack of guidelines for their pupils. By the end of September, the NCSE had yet to publish any specific guidance to schools for children with additional needs.

2020 was a turbulent year for special education at primary level in Ireland. With special schools being threatened with closure, an incomplete pilot being used as the basis for huge reforms to SNA allocations, the closing of school buildings where pupils with additional needs suffered more than others, and the failure to open enough classes for children with autism, it has been a troubled year for the NCSE and a troubling year for pupils with additional needs. While the year will probably be remembered for only one thing, children with additional needs appeared to be one thing that was forgotten.

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Minister for Special Education and Inclusion

On 2 July 2020, Josepha Madigan was appointed the first ever Minister with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion

Ms Madigan had previously served as Minister for Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht from 30 November 2017 to 27 June 2020.

There are particular challenges and rewards in leading a special school through a pandemic. This article looks at how the staff and pupils of St Paul's, a special school in Cork, adjusted to the events and found support from the wider school community. It shows the benefits of technologies both new and old, and the importance of clear communication.

Since Covid-19 emerged it seems to be all about numbers, so I will start with the number twelve. Twelve is not a bad number and certainly better than thirteen or higher. The number twelve that I refer to here is twelve wonderful pupils in St Paul's who did not return to school on Monday 31 August, because of Covid-19. Thankfully neither they nor their family members had Covid-19 nor any symptom of it. Their parents and guardians just did not want to take a chance, which was entirely understandable.

St Paul's is a special school, of which I am very privileged to be principal. It caters for ninety-six pupils aged four to eighteen who come from all over Cork city and county. There are seven classes for children with a moderate intellectual disability, and eight classes for pupils with a severe or profound intellectual disability. Many of the pupils have additional needs: for example, thirty-one children are also wheelchair users, fourteen are peg fed, and five have life-limiting conditions. Some children also have hearing or visual impairments, mobility issues, or complex medical issues. Considering the challenges that all these children face on a normal day, the fact that all ninety-six have remained safe and well throughout the pandemic is a triumph in itself.

Challenges of shutdown

March 12th (another twelve) was a dark day for all in the educational community. Knowing how much the children truly love coming to school, and how much the families relied upon it, we were better off not realising just how long this shutdown would last. Traditionally our families dread Christmas holidays, Easter holidays, and summer holidays – any holidays, really, as there is so little support for them. Now they were faced with weeks of 'holidays' looming and no certainty of return.

The families lost not only the educational support from the special school but also support from the wider school community: transport, canteen, respite, and clubs. Each of these may be everyday

The Pandemic from a Special Schools Point of View

A Snapshot from a different view



Anne Hartnett
Principal, St Paul's
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occurrences for mainstream pupils, but for our pupils, these are people and places where they are accepted and respected, where they can be themselves. Society has not yet developed enough for that to happen regularly outside of these safe environments.

St Paul's is also the main contact point for the pupils and the multidisciplinary team. Every pupil in the school needs consistent access to at least one of the following: nurses, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists. Their expertise enables our children to function without pain, to communicate basic needs, to move with greater ease, to develop daily life skills, and to try to regulate their challenging behaviour. Suddenly these supports were also absent.

Importance of communication

As a special school, what could we now provide? Like all schools, we wanted the families to know that the lines of communication would remain open. The families had to know that we were there and that they were not alone. Communication would be key.

For me as principal, communication to the staff of St Paul's would also be key. The school staff consists of a caretaker, secretary, thirty-five SNAs, fifteen class teachers, one part-time teacher, an administrative deputy, and me: fifty-five in total. Their reaction to the shutdown was one of despair and bewilderment, but also determination that the priority would be to reach the children.

“**March 12 was a dark day for all in the educational community – knowing how much the children truly love coming to school, and how much the families rely upon it...**”

Teachers and SNAs communicated with their pupils predominantly through their families – mostly mothers. This was done in a myriad of ways: email, Seesaw, Zoom, WhatsApp, and the old-fashioned but reliable post and telephone. All families were asked their preferred method of communication. They were also asked if they wanted to become involved in the remote learning; some agreed, while others deferred but knew how to connect with us if required.

From the outset, remote learning was going to be our greatest challenge. In a classroom environment, the majority of our pupils find it difficult to attend to any lesson longer than 20 minutes. To do so via a screen would create an even bigger challenge.

The teachers quickly manoeuvred around this obstacle with the support of their SNAs. As the class sizes ranged from six to eight pupils, some of the fifteen classes could manage a class Zoom, Seesaw, or WhatsApp lesson; most could not. The teachers reduced the numbers participating to enable every child to benefit and held a few sessions every day. All online classes were also attended by at least one family member, again usually a mother.

For pupils who did not benefit from remote learning or have access to it, sensory packages were posted or, in some cases when restrictions eased, delivered to the door. It might have been home-made sensory stories, an item borrowed from the school, or a collection of gizmos from the teacher's or SNA's home, but whatever it was, if it brightened the child's day, then

the objective was achieved. We also have siblings in the school, so in some cases it was double the fun.

Communication continued to be the key, particularly as time moved on and it looked like the school would not open before the summer. If a parent wanted to express their frustration at the unfairness of it all, we were there. If they wanted to share their worry about a new behaviour, we were there. If they wanted to champion their child's new achievement, we were there. And of course, if they did not want any communication whatsoever, that was fine too, once they knew that if they changed their minds, we were there.

A lot of promises were made about July education or provision but were poorly thought out and gave many families more stress than relief. Families who requested assistance during July received it. I only hope it will be offered to everyone again next year.

Sources of support

Throughout the shutdown, staff remained a tremendous support to each other and to me. I had regular Zoom meetings with class teams of three or four people, rather than with the whole staff. This format worked well for us, as everyone had a chance to speak and to listen. Ideas that worked were shared on Google Drive, and my number was available to all for contact at any time. An SNA set up a 'Giggles' group on WhatsApp for all staff to share happy, upbeat stories, jokes, or memes. This proved a great success and remains to this day.

The school Facebook page was a jovial addition to St Paul's online families support network. It was so lovely to see videos of the pupils enjoying the sunshine or mastering a skill, and even better for everyone to acknowledge it. We started fundraising for a new school bus in December 2019. We needed to raise €75,000 for a wheelchair-accessible bus. By March we had raised €26,715 due to the valiant and creative efforts of families, staff, and friends of the school. I had thought it would be on hold during the pandemic, but how wrong I was. When we returned on 31 August, we had raised €66,906, which is a phenomenal amount of money when the general public had so many other things to worry about.

Looking back, I spent the last five months fluctuating between concern and confidence. As principal of a special school, in some ways I felt we were at an advantage, with much smaller numbers than mainstream, but at a disadvantage, with up to four adults in smallish rooms. I fretted that the guidelines, when they were published, were not specific enough for special schools, but I felt reassured that we had a full-time school nurse on the premises. As the pupil population were cocooning and would return safe, I worried that staff would feel responsible if Covid-19 got through the doors.

The lead-up to reopening the school was frantic. Board of management meetings were frequent and fastidious. Checklists were ticked, dated, amended, ticked again, dated again. The work done by the school caretaker

“I was so grateful to receive the support from the staff, the board of management, and the wonderful group of Cork Special School Principals. We speak the same language, and never before did we lean so much on each other.”

“Without a shadow of a doubt, though, the greatest remedy for the pandemic was and continues to be the children.”

and the admin deputy was remarkable. For a special school with so many vulnerable children, the pressure was truly enormous. But the mantra for staff was communication and support. I practised what I preached.

I was so grateful to receive the support from the staff, the board of management, and the wonderful group of Cork Special School Principals. We speak the same language, and never before did we lean so much on each other. Questions and concerns were also answered by the IPPN (Irish Primary Principals' Network), CPSMA (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association), and NABMSE (National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education). These education stakeholders were a vital resource for me and continue to be so. It all helps.

Without a shadow of a doubt, though, the greatest remedy for the pandemic was and continues to be the children. Since March, their parents and guardians repeatedly said they were amazed at how well they were managing. Many revelled in having all family members at home and to themselves. The testament to how resilient they truly are was their return to school. The building was familiar yet changed; staff were the same yet different; routines were recognisable yet altered. But again they coped, again they adapted, and again they kept smiling, and will keep doing so, like all children do. We too adapt and cope and keep smiling, as these children are our number one, the most important number of all.

Exploring how to teach the wonders of the seashore



Pre-service teachers from Mary Immaculate College Limerick join Dr Noirin Burke on Grattan beach in Galway, where she introduces them to teaching children about the wonders of the sea-shore. Dr Burke is part of the Explorers Educational Programme. Photo Anne Dolan.

Edu-Parenting during Covid-19

Reflections of a primary-school parent

Deirdre McGillicuddy

The pandemic of 2020 has caused a monumental pivot in Irish education, with physical school closures resulting in a shift of responsibility for educating our children from teachers to parents. This article reflects on the challenges and opportunities presented to parents, children, and schools during distance learning and considers how this has redefined our understanding of education and schooling in Irish society.

As schools and crèches closed their doors on 13 March 2020, little did I know that my preschooler, first-class, and third-class children would finish out their school year at my kitchen table. Like many parents, I saw the initial phases of physical school closures dominated by a narrative of 'making the best of this time together' while engaging in 'slow' activities such as baking, arts and crafts, connecting with nature, and learning to cycle again. We prepared for a very different St Patrick's Day, with virtual parades replacing the boisterous celebrations associated with this patriotic festival.

Our patriotic duty now was to #stayhome and #staysafe. As children counted down the days for school and crèche to reopen, it began to dawn on us as a nation that this year we would all be embarking on an educational journey never previously experienced. The institution that is education in Ireland was to make one of the most extraordinary pivots since its establishment, one unlike anything we had witnessed before. It has redefined our understanding of education and raised many questions about the role of schooling in our society, and in our family lives.

Families' experience of distance learning varied across the country. My own children's schools and crèche went above and beyond to try to connect with our children using virtual platforms and modes of communication. There were weekly plans of work, a virtual active schools week, online lessons, and video messages from early years educators and teachers. Each interaction was filled with empathy, deep care, and reassurance that everything would be okay.

Parent Voices



Deirdre McGillicuddy

Mother of Three, Primary School Teacher, and Assistant Professor at UCD School of Education

Sarah Cran née Carroll

Mother of three primary-school children

Jennifer Scully

Mother of two primary-school children

The important rites of passage in our children's lives were brutally interrupted, with my preschooler graduating via Zoom in our back garden and taking her first steps into the unknown world of the junior infant classroom without us there to hold her hand. *Home School Hub* and *Cúla4 ar Scoil* quickly became staples in our daily routines, allowing time for us as parents to catch up with work while our children were edu-tained in front of the TV screen. Truth be told, we could never catch up on work, and all we could do was try to survive the chaos of our family life.

Some families, such as front-line and essential workers, struggled to secure childcare, while others were impacted by the economic fallout from the pandemic, with job loss and financial worries reshaping their family lives. The deep inequalities in our education system quickly rose to the surface, with families and children finding themselves in a position where they did not have the resources they needed to be able to engage with education during the physical closure of schools. Such accounts have raised serious questions about the inequities evident in our education system.

The use of technology emerged as paradoxical, enabling while also disengaging. Zoom calls, which started with squeals of delight and murmurs of anticipation, soon descended into frustration at not being able to interact individually with friends as you would in the real-world classroom. The children expressed quiet discomfort at 'performing' in front of the virtual camera, with my youngest often refusing to do so. The assumption around expecting children to engage through virtual platforms raises key issues about their individual rights and their ability to consent and assent.

“The deep inequalities in our education system quickly rose to the surface.”

Fatigue with Aladdin, Seesaw, Kahoot, and Zoom quickly set in, with parents struggling to keep track while children started to dread the 'ping' of a new notification. But the legacy of using such apps and modes of communication will be profound, as they continue to be a critical mode of interaction between school and home. It remains to be seen whether such approaches strengthen that relationship, a direct line which, up to now, has been challenging to establish and maintain. It is also important to question the assumption that families have equal access to the technology and resources necessary to be able to communicate through these complex modes, if we are to ensure an equitable approach to the home-school relationship.

The deeply embedded relational aspect of schooling was particularly notable in its absence during the physical school closures this year. Curricular tasks assigned to children were detached from the vital relational aspect of learning, the compass against which children understand their identity as learners in the classroom. Indeed, when principals, teachers, and special needs assistants (SNAs) did have the opportunity to engage with the children, they did so in a deeply relational way, giving them emotional support and encouragement which, in my children's experience, boosted their mood and enhanced their engagement.

The work of teachers and SNAs is embedded in a pedagogy of empathy and compassion. As we were thrown into disarray and fear of the unknown, principals, teachers, and SNAs provided an anchor to normality for children during this unsettling time. The vital physical reopening of schools in

September has reinforced the importance of the relational in nurturing our children to begin to flourish again under the expert guidance of our school communities.

A striking aspect of education during Covid-19 was how the private became public. Schools were suddenly reaching into the private spaces of our homes and families. This dictated our daily practices in our private lives, not only in the work that children were assigned but also in our family routines and sacred spaces. This, for some, was of great benefit, assigning tasks and fun activities to keep children engaged in learning at home. For others, it was accompanied by great stress in trying to juggle work with what I term 'educating'.

Not only did the children pick up on this stress, but it also affected their desire to engage. After all, as I was told on many an occasion, 'That's not how teacher does it!' Equally, the private space of school and the classroom was projected into the public domain. Teaching became a public activity, open to scrutiny and criticism based on assumptions rather than on deep pedagogical understanding. Such negative narratives on the complexity of pedagogy in classrooms is extremely damaging, resulting in a polarisation between teaching as a profession – traditionally held in high esteem in Irish society – and a more neoliberal, reductive approach to understanding education and schooling.

The pandemic has led us to question the societal value of education and schooling. School is at the heart of our communities, the fulcrum which draws us all together daily. It is fundamental in shaping the temporal, spatial, and social practices in our lives. From drop-offs and collections, to homework, holidays, and building relationships in our communities, school shapes the everyday occurrences in how we live and experience our lives. The absence of schooling resulted in an absence of community. And who are we without community? How can we understand ourselves and others in the world if we do not meet on a daily basis? School plays a vital role in shaping our national identity and defines our role as global citizens in an increasingly complex and challenging world.

As we look to the future, living with Covid-19, it is imperative that we place children and young people at the heart of any decisions we make in education. While school staff are going above and beyond to meet very challenging expectations to keep our communities safe, we need to consider the impact this is having on everyone's well-being, particularly children's. The rigorous routines implemented in schools to protect everyone are characterised by face masks, social distancing, sanitising of hands, hyper-vigilance, restricted social interaction with peers, and pods and bubbles.

Children's lives have changed drastically. They no longer have the right or freedoms to engage with the world on their own terms. Their school lives are now heavily determined by routines and restrictions that control their every movement, preventing their free engagement with peers. Although we hope this change is temporary, the impact of these oppressive regimes required to tackle Covid-19 should not be underestimated, with my children consistently hoping for 'the time when this is all over'. It is incumbent upon

“ The deeply embedded relational aspect of schooling was particularly notable in its absence during the physical school closures this year.

“ I found Seesaw really stressful at first... we didn't have enough devices for everyone... we ran out of ink, we ran out of paper, the printer jammed.

us as a society to acknowledge the critical agency and citizenship of our children and young people in adapting to this very alien way of living their lives.

Homeschooling during Lockdown

No substitute for social learning among peers

Sarah Cran née Carroll

Sarah is a working mother who homeschooled her three primary-school boys in spring while working during the lockdown. Here she gives a frank account of the experience: how her family dealt with the challenges of having to educate children at home while juggling jobs, learning new technology, and managing other responsibilities.

I work three days a week in a children's hospital, while my husband works full-time from home. We have three boys, aged ten, seven, and four at the time of the first lockdown. My husband works in commercial property management and was incredibly busy, particularly in the initial weeks. He did an amazing job looking after the boys, keeping everyone safe and fed, while managing a team and coordinating Covid-19-related operational changes for ten hours a day while I was at work in the hospital. He simply wasn't in a position to consider their educational needs on a day-to-day basis as well. So I took responsibility for preparing their work for the next day, choosing tasks they were less likely to need help with, writing instructions, printing off whatever they needed, and negotiating a suitable bribe to get their work done without disturbing their Dad too much!

My older boys were in first and fourth class at the time of the lockdown. Initially, their teachers sent emails with work to be completed over the coming weeks. All of their books remained in the school. When it was apparent that the lockdown was going to be extended, we were all encouraged to download the Seesaw app, to which their teachers uploaded work each week.

I'm not technologically proficient at the best of times, and I found Seesaw really stressful at first. We didn't have enough devices for everyone. It was a case of opening the app on my phone, downloading the files, sending them to the desktop and printing from there, before taking photos of all of their completed work to upload. We ran out of ink; we ran out of paper; the printer jammed.

My four-year-old's Montessori teacher organised a few Zoom calls for the class. While I appreciated the idea, it felt abstract and confusing for them. Young children play together. They don't 'chat' without the scaffold of a social environment. The school was also great with providing links to worksheets and lists of fun learning activities to do at home. It was lovely to see my four-year-old learning the three Rs through writing shopping lists, identifying colours and sounds out on our walks, and measuring out baking ingredients.

In reality, however, when both parents are working, there is very little time for hands-on experiential learning. Even the best-behaved four-year-old (and he was) needs adult attention and supervision, so it was difficult for my husband when I wasn't there. Most days, my four-year-old coloured. We went through half a forest's worth of paper!

We managed to resuscitate an old tablet computer and gradually got the hang of Seesaw. I think that the boys' primary school struck a really nice balance between academic work and more experiential learning. My husband would have struggled to do any of the more hands-on exercises while I was at work, so we would try to schedule those for my days off. We depended on screens where we could: PE with Joe, story time with David Walliams, Drawing with Alan (a great YouTube series by Irish author and illustrator Alan Nolan), and of course Home School Hub.

At one stage, I was running a staff support helpline for a few hours a week, which I was able to do from home. Given the confidential nature of the work, I needed a quiet and uninterrupted space. So I set up 'clinic' from my car in the driveway. Every so often, one of the boys would come out and try to grab my attention. In fairness to my husband, whatever task he was doing, he always managed to notice just in time and hook them back inside the house by their hoodies. Needless to say, there were some days when very little schooling was achieved!

“I'm under no illusion that what we provided was 'teaching'... I did not inspire my children to learn.”

I'm under no illusions that what we provided was 'teaching'. We provided structure to the children's day, some meaningful activity, and hopefully enough revision to stop them falling behind. They watched far more TV than usual, and probably would have watched more if the weather hadn't been so good. There were parts that we all enjoyed: the scavenger hunts, exercising together as a family, and revising our Gaeilge (with some of us needing more refreshing than others!).

But I did not inspire my children to learn. Even my eldest, who has always been an enthusiastic student, seemed determined to do as little as he could get away with. Simply getting them to do the tasks set for them was much harder than I thought it would be. I was no substitute for a qualified teacher and for social learning among peers. This has been strikingly apparent since their return in September, hearing their chat about which table has the most stars, preparing what to tell the class at 'news' time, and continuing discussions from class debates. I feel more engaged with their educational journey than I was before. Having said that, I still shudder when I see the Seesaw app on my phone.

Homeschooling: From Textbooks to the School of Life

Jennifer Scully

Jennifer writes about the experience of homeschooling her two children, aged seven and five, during the lockdown of 2020. After initial enthusiasm, the workload became overwhelming, though the experience proved ultimately enjoyable. But the right balance had to be found via trial and error.

The announcement of a national lockdown and school closures in mid-March came as something of a relief to me. As a medical professional, I was all too aware of how deadly this virus could be and how easily it could spread, particularly in crowded places like schools. I was in a fortunate position in that I didn't have to worry about the logistics of childcare or working from home, as I was on a career break from St James's Hospital. Homeschooling the kids couldn't be that difficult, right?! What transpired over the following few weeks was that homeschooling my two darling children (then aged seven and five) would be the most challenging job I've ever had.

Like most parents, I approached the first days of homeschooling with enthusiasm. We had our timetables, and the kids were excited that I would be their new teacher. Daddy was working from home, meaning he would have break-times, mealtimes, and impromptu kickabouts in the garden. All our friends and family were safe and well, and we were so thankful for that. Our school set homework for the kids on the Seesaw app, which was a useful way for the school to send work home and to keep an eye on both the progress and participation of the children.

“As the weeks rolled on, receiving this daily workload for each of the children became overwhelming.”

As the weeks rolled on, however, receiving this daily workload for each of the children became overwhelming. After all, I wasn't just the school teacher: I was also running the household and doing the housework in a considerably busier house, given that everybody was at home. It became difficult to juggle everything: the schoolwork, the housework, the cooking, the 'fun' activities with the kids, keeping in touch with friends and cocooning relatives and neighbours, exercising, maintaining social outlets for the kids, and keeping them entertained without resorting to (too much!) screentime.

Most of the children's extracurricular activities had moved to Zoom, which was yet another schedule to try to keep. It brought the added pressure of ensuring that one child was engaged with what was happening on the screen while entertaining the other child. GAA coaches were sending practice drills for the kids. It all became overwhelming and caused stress in our family. I felt under huge pressure not to let anything slide. I was also determined to cook nutritious food to assist our immune systems during the pandemic. Paranoia about the virus was extreme in the beginning, which led to many additional tasks such as washing down the groceries.

Two weeks into lockdown, our lovely, elderly next-door neighbour contracted Covid-19 while in hospital and sadly died. I realised that what the kids would learn during this period was far beyond what could be taught in textbooks. We gradually moved away from the focus on textbooks to the school-of-life approach instead. I made the meals while teaching the children how to cook. I exercised and encouraged them to join in. I set them tasks like writing comics or letters to their pals while I spent time on housework. We began to spend less time sitting at the table doing schoolwork and more time learning day-to-day skills like tying shoelaces, knitting, and tie-dyeing.

A balance was finally struck after the Easter holidays that everyone was happy with. On reflection, the children were very happy during lockdown. Given their ages, it was a huge novelty for them to have the whole family at home together for so long. Teenagers would present very different challenges, I am sure! The kids would camp out in the living room, make trucks out of cardboard boxes, and make marble runs out of toilet rolls. They baked, painted, pressed flowers, learned magic tricks, and discovered online drawing and yoga tutorials.

“ On reflection, the children were very happy during lockdown... it was a huge novelty for them to have the whole family at home together for so long.

They kept a Covid-19 diary in which they listed all the things they missed most about 'normal' life, such as seeing their friends and going to the playground. The list of things they enjoyed about being home was much longer! They loved building forts, baking, drawing, playing rugby in the garden with Dad, and bouncing on the trampoline (oh, thank God for that trampoline!).

I definitely enjoyed the slower pace of lockdown life that resulted from not driving to various daily activities, the absence of play dates, and of course my now socially distant social life. I realised that our pre-Covid-19 schedule had been exhausting for everyone. I held a belief before that I was doing the best for the kids by keeping them involved in lots of different afterschool activities. But actually they were exhausted most of the time, and I was depriving them of time for creative play.

I think the kids learned most in their downtime. When the schoolbooks were cleared away and they were given the time and encouragement to be creative, they seemed to excel. So I can't say that I didn't enjoy homeschooling, although I did find it challenging. The irony is that I was the person who learnt most from the experience. The return to school has produced a beautiful sense of normality that I never appreciated before.

Student Voices

Mo Eispearas i Rith Covid-19

by Shay Ó Hainnín

Seo é aille faoi mo eispearas i rang a sé i rith Covid-19.

Ar an dara lá déag de mí na Márta Fiche Fiche, chuala mé an nuacht go mbíonn gach páiste ag mbrionglóid faoi. Ón dtríú lá déag de Márta, bheadh an scoil dúnta le haghaidh dhá sheachtain iomlán. Ach sa deireadh, ní bhfuair mé an rud a ndearna mé margáil air!

Nuair a tháinig mé abhaile bhí mé ar bís chun dul amach agus súgradh le mo chairde le haghaidh dhá sheachtain. Ach ansin fuair mé amach nach raibh mé ábalta dul amach le mo chairde. Ní raibh cead agam dul aon áit ar bith. Ní raibh aon bialann oscailte, ní raibh aon siopaí oscailte, ní raibh an pictiúrlann oscailte, ní raibh rud ar bith oscailte!

Ag glana na lámha go minic, ag úsáid díghalarán lámha agus ag caithimh mascanna aghaidhe a raibh an nós imeachta nua. D'fhoghlaim mé cúpla focal nua faoin coróinvíreas, mar pandéim, féinaonarú agus scaradh sóisialta. Bhí mé buartha láithreach faoi mo Mhamó agus mo ShinSeanmháithir, mar bhí orthu cocúnú a dhéanamh. Chuir mé glaoch ar mo Mhamó uair amháin gach sheachtain, agus sheolamar litreacha do mo ShinSeanmháithir. Chuireamar teachtaireacht chuichi san Evening Echo chun insint di faoin méid grá agus uaigneas againn di. Lá amháin labhraíomar tríd an bfhuinneog léi chun í a coiméad sabhailte.

Gach lá, nuair a bhíomar ag ithe ár ndinnéar, d'éistíomar leis an nuacht chun fháil amach cé mhéad cásanna nua de coróinvíreas a bhí in Éirinn. Bhain mé an-taitneamh as ag fanacht sa bhaile. Rinne mé an obair ar an ríomhaire, ach bhí mo dhótháin de an t-am go léir. Chaith mé a lán ama le mo mham. D'fhoghlaim mé conas rudaí a chócaráil, agus d'fhoghlaim mé conas aipeanna a úsáid ar an ríomhaire, cosúil le Microsoft Excel, Word, agus Google Docs. Bhí mé ag déanamh cicdornálaíocht ar Zoom gach Luan agus Céadaoin.

Bhí an lá oscailte do mo scoil nua curtha ar ceal, mo scrúdú iontrála freisin. Chuala mé go raibh an teastas sóisearach agus an Aird téist curtha ar ceal. Bhí mo Comhneartú curtha ar ceal freisin, ach bhí cóisir beag le mo chlann agam ar aon nós.

Bhí gach saoire eachtrannach curtha ar ceal, mar shampla mo saoire go dtí an Spáinn agus go New



Shay Ó Hainnín
Student



Catherine Melia
Primary School
Pupil



Ruby Cosgrove
Sixth Class Student,
Scoil Bhríde, Clara,
Co Offaly

Jersey in Mheiriceá. Ina áit sin beidh mé ag fanacht in óstán i gCill Airne ar feadh cúpla lá ag deireadh mí Lúnasa. Beidh mé ag dul timpeall Iarthar chorcaí.

Go hionraic, domsa bhí an dian glasáil níos mó spraoi ná olc, ach is trua liom na daoine a chaill a mbeatha. Ach mar a dúirt Leo Varadkar agus Samwise Gamgee, "Ach sa deireadh, níl ansin ach rud a rith, an scáth seo. Caithfidh fiú an dorchadas imeacht uainn. Tiocfaidh lá nua. Agus an ghrian ag taitneamh beidh sé ag taitneamh níos soiléire."

Táim ag tnúth leis an lá a bheidh an dianglasáil thart mar dá fhada an lá tagann an tráthnóna.

Is é sin deireadh mo aiste. Tá súil agam gur bhain tú taitneamh as.

Bhain mé an-taitneamh as ag fanacht sa bhaile... Go hionraic, domsa bhí an dian glasáil níos mó spraoi ná olc.

Life Lessons

How lockdown affected me and my education

by Catherine Melia

When schools shut on the 12th of March, little did we realise it would be September before they reopened. In this article, a fifth-class student describes how she fared during those first few months.

My name is Catherine. I'm eleven years old, and I am in fifth class. I go to school in Celbridge.

During the last few weeks of school, we got mini bins for tissues in each classroom. We washed our hands before we ate. We did a céilí, and it was the first ever céilí where we didn't hold hands. On the last day of school, we were told that we would be back on the 31st of March. I had to leave early for a piano exam. If I had known then that I wouldn't be back for a few months, I probably would have spent more time saying goodbye to my friends instead of running out the door after a quick wave.

When I first started working at home, I thought it was fun to get a change of scene. After a week, I started missing school, which I never thought I would. I didn't find work too hard, and I got through it quickly. We had a routine for every morning. After breakfast, my parents, my two older sisters and I would work until lunchtime, and then we could do whatever we wanted for the rest of the day.

When we could only go within 2 km, I contacted my friends over email and FaceTime. My three best friends and I had birthdays over April and May, and we drove by each other's houses. It was a pity that we couldn't have a party, but it was still nice. My family and I would normally go on a big walk once a

week, but now we walk and cycle a lot. My dad is usually at work for the day until seven o'clock, but now he is home all the time!

When we could go within 5 km, our walks got longer. When my books were collected from the school, I began doing extra work. I pick a topic that I am interested in, and I do a page or two from it. My mum goes through irregular Irish verbs with me and my sisters.

I have been keeping myself busy during my free time. I've been reading loads and have found many new books. I'm baking and cooking as well. I play board games and cards with my family. I've been outside on the trampoline and gardening as well.

Good things about lockdown: it is better for the environment, with less cars, and the walks keep me healthy.

The good things about lockdown are that it is better for the environment, with less cars, and the walks keep me healthy. I have lots of time to read and do arts and crafts. I've noticed things that I usually wouldn't notice, and I get to spend more time with my family. The downsides are that I miss my friends, the work from home can be hard without a teacher explaining things, you can't visit your relations, you have to social-distance, and there are no parties or shops.

Hopefully, things will get back to normal soon. This whole pandemic has taught me to appreciate the smaller things in life!

My Learning through Covid-19

by Ruby Cosgrove

At the beginning of 2020, little did we know that Covid-19 was about to become one of our most used words, impacting on all of our lives in many ways. The initial excitement of school closure soon gave way to adjustment and learning, and though we missed out on some experiences and memories, lockdown has taught us skills that will stay with us forever.

Covid is a word none of us were familiar with until the beginning of 2020. However, we all quickly learned that Covid-19, also known as the novel coronavirus, is a highly infectious and contagious disease leading to respiratory and other issues. For some there are mild to no symptoms, but for others it can be fatal. Little did we know that Covid-19 was about to become one of our most used words, impacting on all of our lives in many ways. Although we had heard about the virus spreading in other countries, it had not yet had a direct effect on Ireland.

On 12 March 2020, the government made a sudden announcement: All schools were to close. For my class and me, the news began to trickle through the church not long after our Confirmation ceremony began. Little did we realise that this was the last time our class and all other 2020 classes would be together as a group.

At first the news was greeted with lots of joy and happiness among students, as we felt that this time off would be like an extra school holiday, filled with lazy days and no schoolwork. It was not until about a week later that the reality and seriousness of the situation began to sink in. The whole country was now in lockdown. This meant we would have no days out, we could not mix with our grandparents, family, or friends, and we were only permitted to leave our house for exercise – even at this, we had to stay within a 2 kilometre radius of our homes. Rigorous handwashing and sanitising were the new normal.

The lockdown brought huge changes to education. We all knew that we needed to continue our education, and it was going to take a lot of planning and effort to make this happen. With this would come a lot of challenges, the first being to get everyone onto social-media platforms for learning remotely, such as Seesaw, Google Classroom, and ClassDojo.

To make sure everyone joined in, Scoil Bhríde put absolutely amazing efforts into making sure everyone who needed access to a device was provided with one, and people living in remote areas or in houses without internet were given prepaid Wi-Fi dongles. It took a while to get everyone on board and comfortable, but Scoil Bhríde were outstanding when it came to making sure everyone's needs were met.

One of the things I enjoyed about this experience was getting to type out my work, as it helped improve my IT skills and my typing speed. I also really liked the fact that we all got to start our own routine. Working online meant that we could all get up a bit later and not have to think about putting on a uniform and the usual morning rush. Another great thing about remote learning was that we could all work at our own pace and do our subjects in our own order.

“ A great thing about remote learning was that we could all work at our own pace and do our subjects in our own order. ”

One of the harder things about the experience was the lack of interaction with our friends, teachers, and classmates. We went from talking and laughing with our friends in the classroom to sitting working alone at our kitchen tables. For our class, some of our last primary school memories were missed, such as our last school tour and getting our shirts signed. Instead of having our graduation in school like in other years, everything had to be done online.

This experience has taught us all so much. It has reminded us all that we shouldn't take the little things in life for granted, such as going to school, seeing our friends, visiting our grandparents, going to shops, leaving our counties, or even travelling beyond a 2 kilometre radius. Before lockdown, these were such small things, but when they are taken away from us, it's a whole other story. Going back to school, I feel like we have all learnt skills that will stay with us forever. Overall this experience has taught me so much, and I will always remember my Covid-19 lockdown 2020.

Second ³ Level

Disrupting the Traditional Global Education System

“I believe that the current education system is overdue for disruption. The systems that are there are just too slow, too expensive, and they can’t reach everyone.

“I also believe in the promise of what’s possible, which has been brought about by technology, and the fact that people are willing to use technology. It’s possible to put all knowledge and skills training online for free.”

Mike Feerick, speaking at the 2020 World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE).



Overview of Second Level



Clive Byrne
Director, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

2020 was a year like no other, and the radical changes and ideas that swept the world were reflected in Irish education. This article provides a succinct overview of the second-level chapter, and reflects on current needs and future trends.

This year will go down as a year like no other, moving as it did from a minor feature on the nine o'clock news in January to a pandemic which has killed over a million people and infected tens of millions, bringing western civilisation as we know it to its knees. No country is unaffected, and our new mantra will involve living with Covid-19 for the foreseeable future.

My view of Irish education is that things have always been thus. Well, there's no doubt that our experience this year has seen a chain of events that many would never have thought possible, as our education system pulled out all the stops to enable the class of 2020 to move on with their lives. My immediate task is to give a flavour of how second level coped with the crisis and to share insights from colleagues operating in the system from different perspectives.

The well-being of students and staff was at the heart of how schools coped during lockdown. Anne Tansey, Director of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), reflects on how NEPS supported student well-being during the pandemic, and even though services could not be delivered in formal school settings, every effort had to be made to support students wherever they were on their well-being journey.

As a result of the sudden school closure, students with special educational needs and others with disabilities were left terribly exposed. The lack of routine, absence of face-to-face personal supports, and difficulties with access to broadband and ICT equipment highlighted challenges in a sector where despite 20% of the education budget being spent on SEN, those students lost out more than others. Teresa Griffin, CEO of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), writes here about what NCSE have done, with reflections and feedback on this experience and their plans for the future.

Investment in ICT, as part of the government's digital strategy and the national effort to roll out an effective broadband service, was key to

the success or failure of blended learning approaches while schools were closed. Two schools, Coláiste Bhaile an Chláir in Galway and St Joseph's Secondary School in Rush, County Dublin, share their experiences of using technology during the lockdown in pieces written by Alan Mongey in Galway and Daniel Murray in Rush.

How best to enable the class of 2020 to move on with their lives was at the heart of discussion in the early stage of the lockdown. When it became clear that it wouldn't be possible to hold the Leaving Certificate exam, it was decided to go with a calculated grades process using teachers' professional judgement to assign marks to their students. The Chief Inspector, Dr Harold Hislop, describes the process of moving from the Leaving Cert.

Gean Gilger, an education policy and development officer with responsibility for Irish-medium schools, describes the successes and challenges faced by Gaelscoileanna in the education and training boards (ETB) sector during the pandemic.

Looking to the future and dealing with climate change and climate justice with an Education Programme for Sustainable Development is the theme of a piece by Valerie Lewis, education policy officer with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), using resources from the Take 1 Programme. It highlights the importance of paying attention to all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals and the need to ensure the inclusion of all student voices in the conversation.

Gender issues and how best to support trans students has emerged as an issue for second-level students over the last few years. Vanessa Lacey from Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) writes about the challenges faced by young transgender people in our schools. Vanessa advocates using a holistic, wraparound approach to support trans students, and in a post-Covid-19 era the insights provided will help inform society on the best way forward.

Dr Triona Hourigan, a teaching and education research expert in the Department of Education and Skills, writes about the impact of Covid-19 on second-level schools and the supports put in place for schools in consultation with the education partners.

At the time of writing, the High Court is considering several cases from individual students and a board of management on the perceived unfairness of the calculated grades process. First- and second-round CAO offers have been issued, and almost 85% of students have accepted their first, second, or third choice courses. Students will have the option of sitting the Leaving Cert exams in November, and it will be interesting to see how many are anxious to take this route, given the increased number of appeals being considered at the moment.

The logistics of holding these exams will be complicated, but second-level schools will do their best to facilitate their recent past pupils. For those students fortunate enough to match or exceed their expectations, it is a launch pad to third-level education or other career opportunities. There are more pathways on offer than ever before, and today's employers are

“ Last year's Junior Cert students must not be forgotten ... Transition Year programme needs to be reimaged...”

“ Stakeholders must focus on what can be done to ensure that the Leaving Cert class of 2021 is not disadvantaged.”

open to sourcing talent from non-traditional disciplines and do so with a greater appreciation for the diverse experience and skill sets this brings.

Education stakeholders must now focus on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on our class of 2021. This group will have equal if not greater challenges than the class of 2020.

March's school closures came at an awkward time. Every effort was made by teachers to continue coursework through online learning, but many students – particularly in disadvantaged areas – did not experience the same level of learning.

In addition to sixth years, schools have to award the Junior Certificate Profile of Achievement (JCPAs) as a testimony to the work done and achievements recorded during the previous three years. All the excitement and energy were focused on calculated grades, but last year's Junior Cert students must not be forgotten. The majority are now in Transition Year, but this programme needs to be reimaged if the work experience and community placement are to be retained.

Fewer take the Leaving Cert Applied, and we must ensure that this programme is also re-energised to meet the needs of an expanding apprenticeship model, and that curricular aspects (especially Maths) are configured to enable a seamless transfer to apprenticeship programmes which don't at the moment recognise foundation level as a valid progression option.

Stakeholders must focus on what can be done to ensure that the Leaving Cert class of 2021 is not disadvantaged.

Each school begins the Leaving Cert course by covering different topics, so radical changes to course syllabi are not possible, according to the State Exams Commission. Wider choice in the exams next June seems to be the preferred option, along with earlier notification of tasks and projects to be completed for subjects with practical or second components.

The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) has long advocated for Leaving Certificate reform, and we ask the Minister for Education to continue dialogue and consultation on how Ireland might develop a more adaptive, sustainable, and modern senior cycle programme in the period ahead. As we adapt to living with Covid-19, the ongoing work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on this matter is now more important than ever.

Last year the NAPD conducted a survey on senior cycle reform. In reply to the question 'What is the most important thing you want for your students from their time spent in education?', 90% of principals, deputy principals, and teachers who responded said they wanted their students to develop as balanced, knowledgeable, and well-rounded people. A telling comment from one participant was:

If teachers are going to mark their own students for an exam which determines access to college and courses, it will fundamentally change the relationship between them to the detriment of both. Having a

positive, supportive relationship provides a basis for learning in a secure environment, and having the teacher as a facilitator of learning and not as a judge is the best way of protecting that.

In the light of the shift to calculated grades, I wonder does that view still hold? Another interesting point is that when we didn't know any different and hadn't been through the calculated grades process, 78% of students, when asked, said they would not support teachers correcting their own students' continuous assessment projects, for fear of negative bias.

At the time of writing there is controversy over students who took the exam in previous years being at a disadvantage for college entry. In the NAPD survey, where 80% of student participants had completed their Leaving Cert within the last five years, just 4% thought the Leaving Cert was fair and accurately assessed students; 13% thought it was fair but placed unnecessary pressure on students; 83% did not feel that the exam, in its current format, was the best way to assess educational achievement or prepare them for the world of work or life outside of education.

When asked if there was one thing they would change about the Leaving Cert, 78% of students said they would move away from one final written exam to a system of continuous assessment over senior cycle. 79% don't feel that the current senior cycle programme encourages active learning methodologies, and 67% feel that the points they achieved were not an accurate reflection of their abilities.

Almost half of parents would like to move away from one final written exam to a system of continuous assessment spread over two years, and over 30% would like factors other than Leaving Cert results to decide college entry. Among other issues raised by parents was a reduction in the number of subjects offered for CAO points to three or four, and that involvement in extracurricular activities should count for credits or points. Two thirds of parents believe that the education system should help their children to become well-rounded, knowledgeable individuals.

The educational emergency caused by the pandemic energised all partners to enable the class of 2020 to move on with their lives to further or higher education, apprenticeships, or the world of work, so it's clear that the current system can adapt.

The Leaving Cert is designed to act as a filter for third level – it's a very efficient way of filling first year by the CAO (a wholly owned subsidiary of the universities). I'm old enough to remember the Primary Certificate, which I missed by one year, and the Intermediate Certificate; I was raised in an education system designed for a different Irish society, where remaining in school until seventeen or eighteen was not the norm. School was designed to provide a certificate of achievement when the effective school leaving age was eleven or twelve at the end of primary, or fourteen or fifteen at second level.

I also remember the Group Certificate offered in the 'Tech', which was designed for those heading to apprenticeship. It is interesting that there

“If teachers are going to mark their own students for an exam which determines access to college and courses, it will fundamentally change the relationship between them to the detriment of both.”

Agreement is widespread that the current model of a terminal exam is not the way to go.

was extensive debate about the appropriate age to undertake a vocational or academic track in school. In Germany and Austria, this decision is made when students are aged twelve or thirteen – probably too early in an Irish context, where there is a distinct snobbery about vocational versus academic tracks. Few realise that in Germany it's possible to qualify as an apprentice at level 10 (PhD). The recent launch of apprenticeships in insurance and taxation will go some way to redefining the old perceptions.

What learning outcomes are we seeking to achieve with our current Leaving Cert? How best can we assess these learning outcomes? There is no doubt that the current Leaving Cert model is more geared towards memory than applied learning. Irish students have learned how to game the system. A student's performance in six subjects is considered for third level entry – but why six? Why not five or four subjects was a question posed during earlier consultations. Irish students have cracked the code, and a de facto hierarchy of easier subjects to study for points has emerged.

Commentators claim that our students are being educated for jobs that haven't been invented yet. There is a suggestion that 40% of our current university courses may be obsolete by 2030. If only part of this narrative is true, then Ireland needs to develop greater student independence to adapt their learning. Student voice was heard forcefully in the recent discussions on calculated grades, and it makes sense to involve students in any discussion on their preferred model for senior cycle. 'Nothing about us without us', as was stated earlier.

Innovative teaching methods in line with novel assessment methods are needed to provide a portfolio of achievement reflecting students' time in second level. The Department has provided significant resources to support teachers' professional development. Agreement is widespread that the current model of a terminal exam is not the way to go. What will replace it? 'Brutal but fair' is the mantra for Leaving Cert, but does it need to be so if Ireland's education is to reflect the values we want to promote as a society? Continuous assessment, and greater emphasis on student peer presentations and independent learning opportunities, must be accommodated into any new assessment model.

The challenge now is for schools to remain open. Pragmatic strategies to maximise attendance mean that many students are now in student-based rooms. Screens and masks are the order of the day. As classes stay in the same room, the rich material and other resources available to promote interactive expression are no longer there. Teaching is pared back, not just to 'chalk and talk', but more didactic, and the student experience will be different – not necessarily worse, but different, and some students will lose out.

Another point to consider in designing a better way forward is the large number of schools and colleges: over 700. As capitation follows the student, our second-level schools are driven by competition rather than collaboration. Is there merit in considering the concept of a middle school as in the American model? Irish society should debate the ideal size of a second-level school, the number of students, the range of subjects, and

whether there should be schools specialising in creativity and the arts, music and performance schools, a three-year senior cycle perhaps, incorporating the best of Transition Year to develop student maturity and independence, and the facilities necessary to promote physical education, drama, computer and IT skills, and to emphasise inclusion, education for all, and lifelong learning.

Let's take the opportunity to think outside the box. Recent debate about the number of students that can be accommodated safely in a 49-square-metre classroom should help discussion on the flexibility of designing a school's needs to maximise what it can offer to students. As money is cheap, now may be the time to borrow and invest in school buildings and other capital programmes. It would certainly be money well spent!

This year, as a result of grade inflation, additional places were made available in further and higher education settings. These must remain in the system. Over the next few years, the numbers attending second level will grow, and the additional spaces will be needed. High-points courses are characterised by the limited availability of places. Generic courses for first year must be considered in Science, Engineering, and so on, with greater specialisation possible at the end of first year or after completing the primary degree.

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will raise the profile of Post-Leaving Cert courses and emphasise their ability to respond quickly to industry needs. Closer links with industry can then become the norm, with retraining and upskilling opportunities for those workers out of a job as a result of the pandemic.

Things are different this year as schools reopen. In a sense, we're all cowed – not into submission, by any means, but our teaching is different, more didactic, as a result of general wariness, social distancing, and lack of movement around the classroom.

Prior to March, I sensed there were the beginnings of a mood to do things differently, to begin reimagining our senior cycle. As a country, and as a system, we've shown that we can undertake radical change in a short time when we put our minds to it. What we value in education and what we value in society are key questions. Let's do our best to make sure that the class of 2021 is not disadvantaged, but also, let's not lose sight of our need to reimagine the senior cycle to develop the balanced, confident, well-educated eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds that Ireland needs to secure its future.

“As long as certain jobs can only be reached through exams, so long must we take this examination system seriously. If another ladder to employment was contrived, much so-called education would disappear, and no one would be a penny the stupider.”
– E.M. Forster

“Let's not lose sight of our need to reimagine the senior cycle to develop the balanced, confident, well-educated 18-19 year-olds that Ireland needs to secure its future.”

The Well-Being of School Communities

Reopening schools after Covid-19 closures: A psychosocial response

This article discusses the rationale for the approach taken to supporting the well-being of school communities as they reopened following Covid-19 school closures. It reflects on some of what was learned from the experience.

Introduction

Covid-19 has had a major impact on our daily lives, and we have all had to adjust and adapt in the face of significant challenges during 2020. The scale of the continuing pandemic and the duration of recent school closures are unprecedented, both in Ireland and internationally (Doyle, 2020). School closures provided a unique challenge to our education system, and there was a fundamental change in how school communities functioned to support students' education, with emerging evidence of inequitable impact on certain cohorts in their learning and well-being (Darmody, Smyth, & Russell, 2020).

The need to reopen schools and return all students to the support provided by schools became a national imperative. It was recognised that the well-being of school communities needed to be an important element of the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) overall plan to ensure a successful return to school.

Supporting well-being and resilience

The concept of resilience acknowledges that life can require adaptation to change, loss, and sometimes trauma. Resilient individuals can make a positive, adaptive response to adversity. Ireland's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)* (DES, 2018) acknowledges that factors related to a person's skills and competencies, their affectional ties with family, and the existence of supportive relationships, safe communities, and support systems, including school systems, provide positive contexts and multiple opportunities to support the development of well-being and enhance the capacity to cope in the face of adversity. The document has adapted the WHO definition of mental health to define well-being:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider

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community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life. (DES, 2018, p. 10)

The policy statement recognises that well-being does not necessarily mean the absence of stress or negative emotions, and that people's experience of well-being may vary; everyone experiences vulnerability at some stages in their journey through life.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in bringing a real risk to the physical health of our citizens, led to an understandable increase in worry and anxiety across society (Darmody et al., 2020) – a normal and healthy response to a real threat (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Kelly (2020) identified three key challenges for all citizens in managing their mental health during this crisis:

- learning to keep our anxiety proportionate to the risk
- learning how to live with a certain amount of worry
- navigating the uncertainty that the Covid-19 virus has brought to our broader lives.

For many, this may have been made more manageable and tolerable as these feelings became normalised and supported by the collective national experience and the societal recognition and response to the situation – including, for example, through the government's *In This Together* campaign. Some children and families, however, have struggled more than others and have experienced loss and grief due to bereavement, or ongoing worry due to personal or family illness and concerns about the health of vulnerable family members. In this respect, the families of some healthcare workers may have experienced a heightened perception of risk and fear of loss (Brooks, 2020).

“ School closure, for some students, removed from their lives some of the key protective factors essential for their well-being.

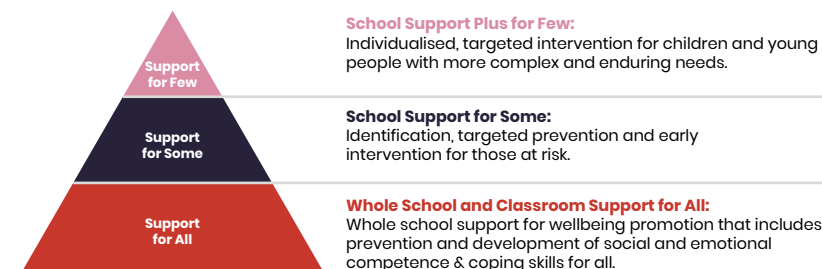
The public health measures that were put in place in Ireland as a response to the pandemic, including the closure of all schools and the requirement for everyone to physically distance and largely stay at home in the earlier stages, have resulted in additional challenges for people's well-being and mental health, for some more than others.

School closure, for some students, removed from their lives some of the key protective factors essential for their well-being, especially the supportive structures and routines of school, which include the experience of belonging, connectedness, and safety, and access to support, resources, and physical activity. School closure also meant, for some students, increased exposure to key risks to their well-being that may have included stressful family situations, likely heightened by Covid-19-related issues such as home-schooling or unemployment, restricted access to friendships, increased social isolation, and lack of access to services. Research suggests that the mental health and well-being of those with pre-existing mental health difficulties and special educational needs were likely to require particular consideration (Lee, 2020).

Developing a model to support the return to school

It was realistic to predict that all students, school staff, and parents would experience a broad range of stress responses as part of the return to school and that supporting the well-being of those school communities needed to be a key element of the DES's plan.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) proposed the provision of a psychosocial response to meeting the well-being needs of school communities as schools reopened, as recommended by the Health Service Executive for the aftermath of a crisis (HSE, 2016). This would require the provision of a 'stepped model of care', with strong emphasis on providing practical, pragmatic, and compassionate support for all, recognising that some may need additional or more targeted supports to recover.



DES/NEPS Continuum of Support framework

The approach used the existing structure of the Continuum of Support Framework (see figure) to support a whole-school, universal approach to planning for the return to school, while recognising that some students would require more targeted intervention and planning to help reconnect with their school community and re-engage with learning.

The nature of the support proposed was underpinned by five key principles, known as the 'Hobfoll Principles' (2007), which are widely accepted and explicitly recommended as protective factors to support optimal returning to normalcy and well-being in the aftermath of an emergency. The principles underpinning the approach to supporting well-being as schools reopened include the promotion of:

- a sense of safety (feeling both physically and psychologically safe at school)
- a sense of calm (feeling relaxed, composed, and grounded (regulated))
- a sense of belonging and connectedness (experiencing meaningful relationships with others who understand you and support you in your school community)
- a sense of self-efficacy and school-community efficacy (feeling that you and your school community can manage this)
- a sense of hope (feeling that things will work out well).

Implementing the Hobfoll Principles at the universal, whole-school level, *Support for All*, required, as a basic and essential response, implementing strong physical-safety measures, with clear and calming communication and awareness-raising across all members of the school community. A settling-in period was also advised, to enable school communities to adapt

and adjust to being back in the school environment, and to prepare for re-engagement with teaching and learning.

Focusing on well-being, 'slowing down to catch up' on friendships, and school belonging and connectedness were supported with the provision of a range of guidance and resources developed by the DES's Support Services,¹ working with NEPS in a coherent and aligned way; these were communicated via a single platform on the gov.ie/backtoschool webpage. Re-establishing routines, normalising feelings and stress responses, and emphasising school belonging and connectedness as well as self- and community efficacy were incorporated into this element of the response. At this level, emphasis was also placed on the need to promote school staff well-being, partnerships with parents and carers, and student voice and agency as integral and essential elements of a successful return to school.

Implementing the Hobfoll Principles at the targeted and more individualised levels of the Continuum of Support (*Support for Some/Few*), on the return to school, recognised that some students and their families may need support additional to the universal support provided, in order to successfully return to school. Schools were asked to notice and plan for those students who continued to struggle, including those whose needs may have emerged during the pandemic, and those previously identified as having special educational or additional needs, including mental health needs.

Further supports were made available to school communities to support students who were reluctant to attend school, were absent due to illness, had experienced loss, were at risk of becoming disengaged, or whose behaviour seemed different or out of character. This included guidance and support provided by NEPS, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), and the Health Service Executive and HSE-funded services.

“ Well-being may be considered an essential and integral element of successful teaching and learning.”

Looking forward

Supporting a successful sustained transition back to school requires that school communities feel safe, calm, and hopeful, feel that they can manage this challenge, and have a sense of belonging and connectedness in their school community. The ongoing nature of the pandemic, as it surges and wanes in the absence of a vaccine, is likely to lead to fluctuating well-being and mental health, and to a continued need for responsive, flexible systems of support, a trend that is emerging in the literature (Darmody et al., 2020).

Positive learning has emerged from these extraordinary times. The challenges we have faced in the school system have highlighted the centrality and contribution of schools in our society and their crucial role in the development of our children's and young people's lives. The role that schools play in providing supportive and protective relationships, and in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness, has come to the fore. Our current circumstances have highlighted not only how necessary these key school-based protective factors are for the well-being and resilience of our students, but also how well-being may be considered an essential and integral element of successful teaching and learning.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Department's Support Services/Agencies include the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Role of Trade Unions in the workplace

"Covid-19 has underlined the vital necessity of trade unions in the workplace. This has been a year of unprecedented turmoil in education, including the Leaving Cert 2020 and the re-opening of schools in August. ASTI representatives at every level – school stewards, local branches, national committees, ASTI Standing Committee and our elected Officer Board – have continued to engage extensively with the wider membership throughout this time, using online platforms. Information and opinions have been shared and we have continued to use our democratic structures to ensure that the collective voice of teachers is heard."

- Kieran Christie, ASTI General Secretary



Schools in Ireland experienced two major shifts in teaching and learning in 2020: the pivot to remote education in spring, then the return to a reconfigured school space in autumn. This article considers both shifts, analysing the challenges and successes in one post-primary school community.

The emergence of Covid-19 and its impact on reshaping education has been keenly felt throughout the world. In Ireland, schools experienced two major shifts in teaching and learning: first, the pivot to remote education in March, and second, the reintroduction of the physical school space to facilitate in-class teaching from August 2020. As a post-primary teacher and researcher in ICT in education, I have had the opportunity to observe and study how teachers, students, and other stakeholders have adapted to these two distinct environments during a time of great social upheaval and instability.

At the beginning of March, it became clear from news reports that lockdown was inevitable. In the week before the schools were to close, I had decided to trial numerous apps with my classes to facilitate remote learning. In pre-Covid-19 times, my school would have been defined as a typical blended-learning environment, where students integrate a suite of recommended apps in tandem with a set of hard-copy books. Smartphones were the main devices permitted for educational use in the classroom, with the teacher's permission after consultation with parents. Students often used devices as part of their completion and presentation of classroom-based assessments (CBAs).

As we headed into lockdown, I felt somewhat assured that my students could draw on these transferable skills. The transition to remote classes ran smoothly, and I was in a position to live-stream classes from 13 March. At this time, remote teaching was viewed primarily as a short-term reaction to the emerging pandemic. There was a sense of managing and containing the situation, rather than actually adapting to and living with it. No one envisaged that schools would remain physically closed until the end of August. Many believed we would be back and running within weeks.

Remote teaching during lockdown brought specific challenges, as outlined by Mohan et al. (2020). For many, the swift transition to this

Teaching and Learning from a Post-Primary Perspective

Reflections on the impact of Covid-19



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virtual world was complex. The workload was immense. From a pastoral point of view, monitoring student engagement and well-being emerged as a key feature in the response of school leaders and pastoral teams to the pandemic crisis. For me as a teacher working on the ground, liaising with the school's well-being personnel was a primary responsibility, to identify students and families in the community who needed help and support.

Developing an effective pedagogy depended on teachers' digital skills and comfort in navigating this environment. Initially, teachers had to balance the delivery of lessons with the demands of digital administration. Unsurprisingly, email communication from management, colleagues, and students quickly converged in the same chaotic space. Monitoring incoming messages via other educational apps added to this administrative load. Questions and observations from students in the physical classroom, which had enriched and informed the discussion, morphed into individual emails. This led to a more fragmented communication style, where students missed out on their peers' in-class insights.

Furthermore, as the move online was swift, there was simply no time to deliver continuing professional development (CPD) to staff and students or to establish simple and effective means to communicate. This was the case for schools and educational institutions across many countries and jurisdictions. It was therefore essential to be on hand remotely to assist colleagues with their transition online and to provide training sessions for students on how to use our main learning platform.

“The decision by textbook publishers to grant open access to their online e-books and materials was greatly appreciated.”

Zoom fatigue was a constant reminder of the impact of screen time on one's teaching activities – both in delivering lessons and in marking work. Student and teacher screen time increased significantly, with many reports of eye strain and indeed back strain from both groups. This is in line with research on the difficulties of learning in a digital context (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019a). It is important to stress that many students and teachers were working in informal workspaces at home which were not conducive to teaching or studying.

Amidst these challenges, many students were also experiencing broadband issues, so I switched quickly to asynchronous teaching. Some were also reporting difficulty in accessing devices. Working primarily from a phone was clearly not easy, particularly for Senior Cycle students, who needed more device functionality to complete longer assignments. In many cases students were sharing devices with parents working from home and other siblings. Consequently, iPads from the school were made available to students and teachers.

Given the technical issues, the decision by textbook publishers to grant open access to their online e-books and materials was greatly appreciated. Since many teachers and students had hastily left their books and materials in the school building, this leadership from the Irish educational publishing sector was of immense help. Open resources such as Scoilnet also emerged as important sources of material to support teachers. The timely growth in resources available on Scoilnet (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019b), which is

supported by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), played a significant role during this crisis.

Remote teaching was extremely busy and stressful for many, but it did allow the space to explore alternative means of content delivery and assessment. Feedback was a challenging aspect of remote teaching. I decided to invest in a tablet device and digital pen to optimise feedback given to written expression pieces, particularly for fifth- and sixth-year students. This made the feedback process more accessible and allowed targeted commentary to be provided.

Though classes were scheduled according to the school timetable, what worked best, in my opinion, was creating instructional video content to facilitate asynchronous learning. This allowed me to be present during class time to respond to questions posted on the online forum. This in turn provided useful revision documentation for students who were unable to attend at class time due to caring responsibilities.

A weekly live Q&A session also proved useful in balancing in-person and recorded content, particularly with the younger classes. Homework accountability was part of this routine: students were invited to upload a daily photo of their homework attempts, where possible. However, it was important to be flexible in this regard and to monitor class participation with compassion, flexibility, and understanding.

Additional forms of assessment were also trialled, including Microsoft Forms for effective assessment for learning (AFL). Some colleagues explored the use of recorded verbal feedback via Seesaw and Microsoft Teams to reduce screen time for students.

As I write this, we are back at school and adapting to teaching during the pandemic. The physical environmental changes have been striking as we have made the transition from working at home to re-engaging with the physical school space. Teacher classrooms have been replaced with student base classrooms, which double up as eating areas for students during break times. A one-way system has been established throughout the school building. Sanitising stations have been installed in all classrooms and at entrances, and all members of the school community must wear masks. Mask breaks outside in the gardens have become essential for student well-being. Windows and doors remain open at all times.

With spaces limited in the staffroom, many teachers sometimes work from their cars. It can be difficult to meet colleagues due to these new but necessary structures. Small breaks and lunch breaks are staggered to reduce congregation. Staff meetings are conducted remotely. We have Covid safety officers to ensure that the DES guidelines are being properly implemented. Class sizes have been reduced where possible to allow for social distancing. We have specific seating plans for each class, to facilitate contact tracing. Shared spaces such as the study hall, canteen, and library have been repurposed as dedicated classrooms.

“ Though classes were scheduled according to the school timetable, what worked best in my opinion was creating instructional video content to facilitate asynchronous learning.

Tests and notes must be quarantined for seventy-two hours. Our school is also encouraging students to leave their books at home and to bring a device to school instead, in order to reduce touch points. We have migrated to a single dedicated learning platform, Microsoft Teams, to simplify access for students. Cleaning has become a normal part of our classroom routine. As we travel to class and sanitise workstations on entry and before we leave, there is an inevitable loss of teaching time.

These essential health and safety measures now influence our pedagogical practice as we adapt our methodologies to teach effectively and safely. What felt new and surreal at the end of August have become accepted norms in our present working conditions. Collegial support and teacher professionalism have been instrumental in the successful reopening of schools. The repurposed school environment has brought about cultural and behavioural changes, which are becoming more embedded and established day by day.

As we face into a difficult winter, we as educators must address the difficulties that Covid-19 will bring. Managing the crisis will be challenging (Hourigan et al., 2020). Students, particularly sixth years, will require additional home learning supports, particularly if they are self-isolating or caring for loved ones. This highlights many questions, particularly in finding creative solutions for students who may not be able to attend school or sit exams. The issue of teachers who need to go on sick leave will also be problematic for schools (Hourigan and Marcus-Quinn, 2020).

It goes without saying that maintaining solidarity and providing compassionate support to our whole school community are essential now as we navigate this difficult and uncertain terrain together.

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“ Reform is usually possible only once a sense of crisis takes hold.

- Charles Duhigg

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented enormous challenges in post-primary education. This article gives a small insight into one school's digital journey before school closure and the challenges and opportunities since schools closed in March 2020.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven people, organisations, schools, and the nation as a whole towards new work practices and routines. According to UNESCO, which has tracked the impact on education, on 10 April there were 188 country-wide closures, with almost 1.6 billion affected learners. While schools and education systems are notoriously slow to change, the pandemic has massively accelerated the embedding of digital learning in our second-level schools.

Prior to March 2020, the vast majority of schools were using digital technologies to support and enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. PowerPoint, laptops, data projectors, Kahoot, and Quizlet could be seen in most schools and classrooms around the country. A smaller cohort use devices on a one-to-one basis as a digital reader replacing physical textbooks, with the added feature of access to online resources and applications such as those mentioned, Google Classroom, or Microsoft Teams.

Our school, Coláiste Bhaile Chláir (CBC) in County Galway, fell into the latter group, with one-to-one devices. However, when we first opened our doors in 2013, we chose to replace digital textbooks with teacher-created learning resources using Microsoft OneNote.

Seven years preparing – and still not ideal!

When word came on 12 March that schools were to close, we were in a good but not ideal position. We had spent the previous seven years focusing on an agreed collective approach to the technologies we use to enhance teaching and learning. As in many schools, practice was not uniform. But we had a solid baseline of agreed practice right across the school, for junior cycle in particular.

Starting in 2013, each subject department came together and created a master set of resources for each subject. These were shared in OneNote. A

Coláiste Bhaile Chláir's Digital Learning Journey and Covid-19

One school's story of accelerated growth during the pandemic



Alan Mongey
Principal of
Coláiste Bhaile
Chláir and
President of NAPD
2019–2020

teaching and learning resource that could be shared with students started to emerge. Resources, content, and learning activities were drawn from many sources. Teachers acted as curators and creators of new content, guided by key leaders in the school.

Over the years, exceptional practice emerged from different subject departments, which was shared across others. At the same time we recruited up to ten teachers annually, each one an excellent teacher rather than a great user of IT. All the development using OneNote was supported by a continuing professional development (CPD) programme based in the school to upskill teachers in proficient use of the software.

We have always told new teachers to forget about the technology at first – use the device in a few weeks, and just use your board marker, whiteboard, and knowledge to begin with. Over time, teachers use the technology in amazing ways as they become comfortable with it. However, one of the keys for us was the simplicity of OneNote, the product we used as a core for our teaching and learning resources.

“ Our students moving to senior cycle had built up a skill set and knowledge base on how to engage effectively with digital learning.

Our digital learning journey has always been about evolution and growing exceptional practice from within the group of teachers. Collaboration and constantly learning from one another are key. Supporting students along this journey is also key. A constant focus is to give them the skills not just to use the software but to use and navigate it effectively. The introduction of key skills in junior cycle was a significant factor in the successful embedding of practice among students.

As the school grew, we did not ask teachers to also create content at senior cycle – although many teachers have – as this is a much bigger task and possibly, hopefully, will be more timely when a review of senior cycle occurs. Our students moving to senior cycle had built up a skill set and knowledge base on how to engage effectively with digital learning.

School closure challenges

Using technology in new ways – new pedagogy

For both teacher and students, sitting in a room together – whether in rows or groups – is what we enjoy best about school. Talking, engaging, interacting, learning, and teaching in a face-to-face environment can never be replaced. Hand movements, individual eye contact, body language, and reading the room are essential for effective teaching and learning to happen.

Moving online, where not only students but teachers were afraid to turn on their cameras, is extremely challenging. Most teachers' first natural inclination is to replicate their traditional classroom. Very few have taught online lessons, and if they have, it was probably to fellow teachers or adults as part of a CPD or university programme. Teaching teenagers online is very different!

Digital divide

Covid-19 had the potential to exacerbate the existing disparities in education for so many people. Not every school was on a level playing field. Some had just started their digital learning journey, while others were well advanced. Even in the latter, there are always challenges. We were lucky in that all of our junior cycle and some of our senior students have a device. So our divide was less challenging than others', but then we must consider infrastructure at home, broadband, the ability to log on with parents and siblings at home, and teenagers potentially babysitting younger siblings.

Disconnection from society

Students and teachers may have been physically apart, but they were digitally together, something many in society – especially those under thirty – are more comfortable with. Many of our students spend a significant proportion of their social life on social media platforms. But most have school, sport, youth clubs, and music venues to interact and physically engage with one another, and this brings a healthy balance.

For many students, a lot of physical social interactions happen in the classroom. Even if they are not best friends or in a large social circle, it is critically important for their mental health to participate in class discussions, see people face to face, and engage with a teacher. One of the greatest challenges we faced during lockdown and school closure was to support those students who struggle socially, who may not have a wide social circle, and who felt isolated at home.

“ One of the greatest challenges we faced during school closure was to support those students who struggle socially and who felt isolated at home.

Our guidance team, supported by year heads and the deputy principals, played a huge role in this. They facilitated and supported social meet-ups online, got students to turn their cameras on to see somebody, and phoned and stayed connected with students they had already been supporting. They ran live online assemblies, and we monitored student attendance. More and more students who may not have presented to our counsellors previously were now on our radar. Touching base with students who were not engaging became really important, as did supporting and highlighting concerns to parents.

School closure and re-opening

Acceleration of schools' digital learning journey

We were in the process of rolling out Microsoft Teams and had just started to map out a CPD plan. We had successfully integrated its use into a number of subject departments and with individual teachers – those who wanted to use it! The lockdown allowed us to accelerate our plans for a school-wide rollout. We did not make it compulsory to use, but rather used it for all school-wide events and meetings, demonstrating its usefulness. This was all with a view to rolling it out school-wide upon our return in September 2020.

It also allowed us to trial different things with lower-risk year groups like first and second year. We expanded our use of online assessments for end-of-year exams, for example. We wanted to see what worked best so we could build it into our future plans.

From a teaching culture to a learning culture

Much of the work we do in CBC is about empowering students by giving them the skills to learn for themselves. But they need to be taught a certain amount of knowledge, so we aimed to support teachers in how best to structure their online teaching, for example by offering support and advice on asynchronous and synchronous online classes, and supporting and encouraging subject departments to talk about how things were going for them online.

Our English department decided to change how they approach the teaching of a number of topics, given how well online classes went and the amount of material they were covering. In fact, they wondered why they had been doing things a certain way for years!

“ Constantly asking students how we can do this better together was, and continues to be, a vital part of our journey in CBC.

Students' use of digital collaboration tools increased exponentially. They could no longer collaborate in small groups in the classroom; instead they scheduled Teams meetings, shared PowerPoint presentations to work on collectively, and used collaboration spaces in OneNote. These are tools and skill sets they will use later in life – whether in work or study.

Teachers learning alongside students

Great teachers are model learners. Those who don't know it all and aren't afraid to show weakness or discomfort with the technology; those who said, 'I too struggle to turn on my camera and deliver live lessons' but overcame it with their students; those who were open to learning alongside their students – they are an inspiration to their students.

We were all on a learning journey during school closure. I firmly believe that coming together to learn new technologies and navigate our way together through the toughest months brought our school community closer together. Constantly asking students how we can do this better together was and continues to be a vital part of our journey in CBC.

The future

Even before the pandemic, education in many schools was undergoing a transformation that will go on long after the virus subsides. But it is essential that we take the best of what worked well. We should also be slow to discard what did not work effectively. As with any transformation, it takes time, and mistakes will be made. In the words of W. Edwards Deming, 'Long-term commitment to new learning and new philosophy is required of any management that seeks transformation. The timid and the fainthearted, and the people that expect quick results, are doomed to disappointment.'

We will continue to try out new things on our digital learning journey. We will continue to make mistakes, but we will take our time, learn from mistakes, identify what works well, and above all not be afraid to take big steps and do things in the best interests of our students to prepare them for a very different world.

The significant efforts made by the entire education system to respond to the huge changes in such a short space of time this year shows us what is possible: the move to online learning overnight, calculated grading for the Leaving Certificate, sitting of exams in November (a potential second chance for some), the cancellation of Junior Certificate exams, the coming together of students and school staff to protect one another by wearing facemasks. We should seize the opportunity over the months ahead to quickly take stock and address some of the issues we previously considered difficult or impossible to implement.

ASTI Remote Convention, 24 July 2020



Deirdre Mac Donald, ASTI President 2019-2020, and Kieran Christie, ASTI General Secretary, at the union's remote convention held in ASTI HQ.

Lockdown or Locked Out?

What are the early lessons from the Covid-19 education revolution?

University access programmes demonstrate that the 'standard' Leaving Cert system is not fulfilling the dreams of many young people who could, in a more open system, reach their full potential. The pandemic suggests we have reached a tipping point with inequality in our education system. Now we need to think about a senior cycle reform process that will support all our young people to reach their full potential.

We have been cursed with living in interesting times. Many claimed a '2020 vision', but few foresaw the global shutdown prompted by the Covid-19 virus. On one hand, the virus has devastated thousands of lives and livelihoods; on the other, it has been the catalyst for systemic change in our society and economy.

After a few decades of falling in and out of love with blended and online learning, the education world was forced to flip and then deal with the consequences. In the spirit of not 'letting a good crisis go to waste', let's consider the early outcomes of the Covid-19 education revolution.

The national obsession with education reached a tipping point. The Leaving Certificate and higher education admissions generated thousands of column inches, heated anecdotes, and, more recently, emerging legal challenges.

Leaving Cert exit divided families, communities, friends, and colleagues. Even Fintan O'Toole declared there was 'no utopian alternative to the Leaving Certificate'. This is despite decades of national outrage at the unfairness, unreasonable pressure, and backwash effect of the State examinations on the second-level system. Is this evidence of a kind of Leaving Cert Stockholm syndrome?

Professor Gerry McNamara of DCU made the case for a senior cycle system with significantly more continuous assessment. He cited evidence from other developed societies that, rather than a high-stakes, terminal exam, use assessment-based learning that 'is best described as externally monitored, school-based and teacher-led'. Such a system, he explained, does not involve teachers awarding grades as a matter of opinion. Rather, teachers are given latitude to exercise their professional expertise within an evaluation framework.

Most of our education system is already using an assessment-for-learning model, in the Leaving Cert Applied, in further education, and in higher



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Programme,
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Dublin

education. Internationally, studies show that countries that use a sharp cut-off, single-modality type of State exam for university admission lose out on many students with potential. With a small, open economy reliant on our young, educated population, we cannot afford to waste potential. It is also a fundamental injustice.

Locked out of learning

While we have anecdotal tales of the lockdown's impact on education, we also have an emerging evidence base. Early-stage research on the impact of the lockdown included 'Learning for all?' (Mohan et al., 2020), 'Teaching and learning during school closures: Lessons learned' (Devitt et al., 2020), and 'Post-primary student perspectives on teaching and learning during Covid-19 school closures' (Bray et al., 2020).

Each report provided evidence that lockdown brought the digital divide into stark relief. Areas with poorer broadband and low household incomes were less likely to engage in the shift to online learning. Schools provided devices to students and did their best to foster community. It was a huge challenge to maintain student engagement, and teachers reported feeling overwhelmed with the volume of work. The well-being, motivation, and engagement of State exam students were severely affected.

Teachers were also concerned about students who they knew had no access to a device, study space, or adequate nutrition. Students in DEIS schools, students with special educational needs, and students studying English as a foreign language were more likely to be locked out of learning throughout lockdown.

The studies highlighted a decline in student well-being during school closures, which was exacerbated when there was no one at home who could support their learning. Many students were concerned about how student-teacher relationships might affect the process of calculated grades. Some students suggested that this unprecedented time could be used to move away from the straitjacket of the Leaving Cert exams.

Schools struggled to cover practical elements of the curriculum. End-of-year assessments were completed mostly through final presentations and open-book exams. While there was no perfect solution, schools supported the decision to cancel State exams and create a new calculated grades system. This required Herculean work by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and educators nationwide.

Schools are open. But we know that education has flipped, if not forever, then at least for the foreseeable future. Students will be dispatched to 'isolation units' in their schools and sent home because of Covid-19 cases. Some of their teachers will fall ill. The studies recommend significantly enhanced ICT (information and communications technology), professional development, new management supports, and well-being supports to weather this bleak midwinter.

Standardisation

It is notable that although the Leaving Cert grades are subject to some standardisation every year, there is now much more information openly

available about the development and implementation of the calculated grades system than we have had before. This level of transparency is welcome.

In an ideal world, all Leaving Certificate students who had met the subject requirements for the courses to which they had applied would have been guaranteed one of their top three choices, in recognition of the huge challenges they faced. But that is not where we are. These challenges have only been exacerbated by the recently announced errors in the Junior Certificate modelling data, which was part of the standardisation process. This may mean that up to 6,500 students will receive at least one grade increase.

It is worth noting, however, that the percentage of students receiving an offer for one of their top three choices is broadly similar in 2019 and 2020: In 2019, 81% of offers were to top-three (level 8) choices. In 2020, 79% of offers were to top-three choices.

As the DES documentation explains, 'standardisation' is a feature of the Leaving Cert system every year – we just don't usually get to see the inner workings. This year, standardisation placed a high value on estimates from the schools. Anecdotal evidence pointed towards an imbalance, where marks were downgraded in some school 'types' but not others. In fact, marks rose across the board. The standardisation was applied to three types of school: DEIS, non-DEIS (including private), and 'other' (mainly grind schools).

As the *Business Post* columnist Colin Murphy explained, the greatest grade inflation this year was in the grind schools. Following standardisation, marks were reduced by more in the grind schools (2.8), as they had risen by more in the first place (0.8 in DEIS and 1.3 in non-DEIS).

It is possible, Murphy observed, that 'the standardisation makes it slightly less unfair to disadvantaged students'. We don't know this, as we do not have access to the inner workings of the usual model of standardisation and to what degree (if any) historical data on school type and performance are used in that model. In the Leaving Cert as we know it, 20% of the cohort is disappointed each year by not receiving one of their top three choices – roughly the same percentage as in Leaving Cert 2020. It is possible that this system worked to rebalance some of the imbalances we know exist in the Irish education system.

Trinity's experience

In Trinity College Dublin, twenty years of data show that students who enter via our access programmes from areas with low progression to higher education do just as well as their peers from higher-progression areas, even when they enter on a lower points threshold. This story is echoed across the higher education sector.

We know from the talent we have seen through these access programmes that the 'standard' Leaving Cert system is not fulfilling the dreams of many young people who could, in a more open system, reach their full potential. Should we not make proper use of this crisis and admit that we have reached a tipping point with inequality in our education system? Then we might progress with a senior cycle reform that would work to support all our young people to reach their full potential.



National Student Grant Awarding Authority

About SUSI

SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) is Ireland's single national awarding authority for all higher and further education funding. SUSI offers support to all types of students, from school leavers to mature students returning to education.

What funding is available?

Course Type	Postgraduate Course	Undergraduate Course (in the EU/UK)	Undergraduate Course	PLC Course
Maintenance Grant	✓ (Special Rate only)	✓	✓	✓
Student Contribution and/or Fees	✓		✓	

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for a grant, the applicant must meet all of the following criteria:

Nationality and Residency:

- Applicants must be an Irish, EU, EEA, UK or Swiss national or have specific leave to remain in the State as granted by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE).
- Applicants must also be ordinarily resident in Ireland, the EU, EEA, UK or Switzerland for 3 of the last 5 years.

Course:

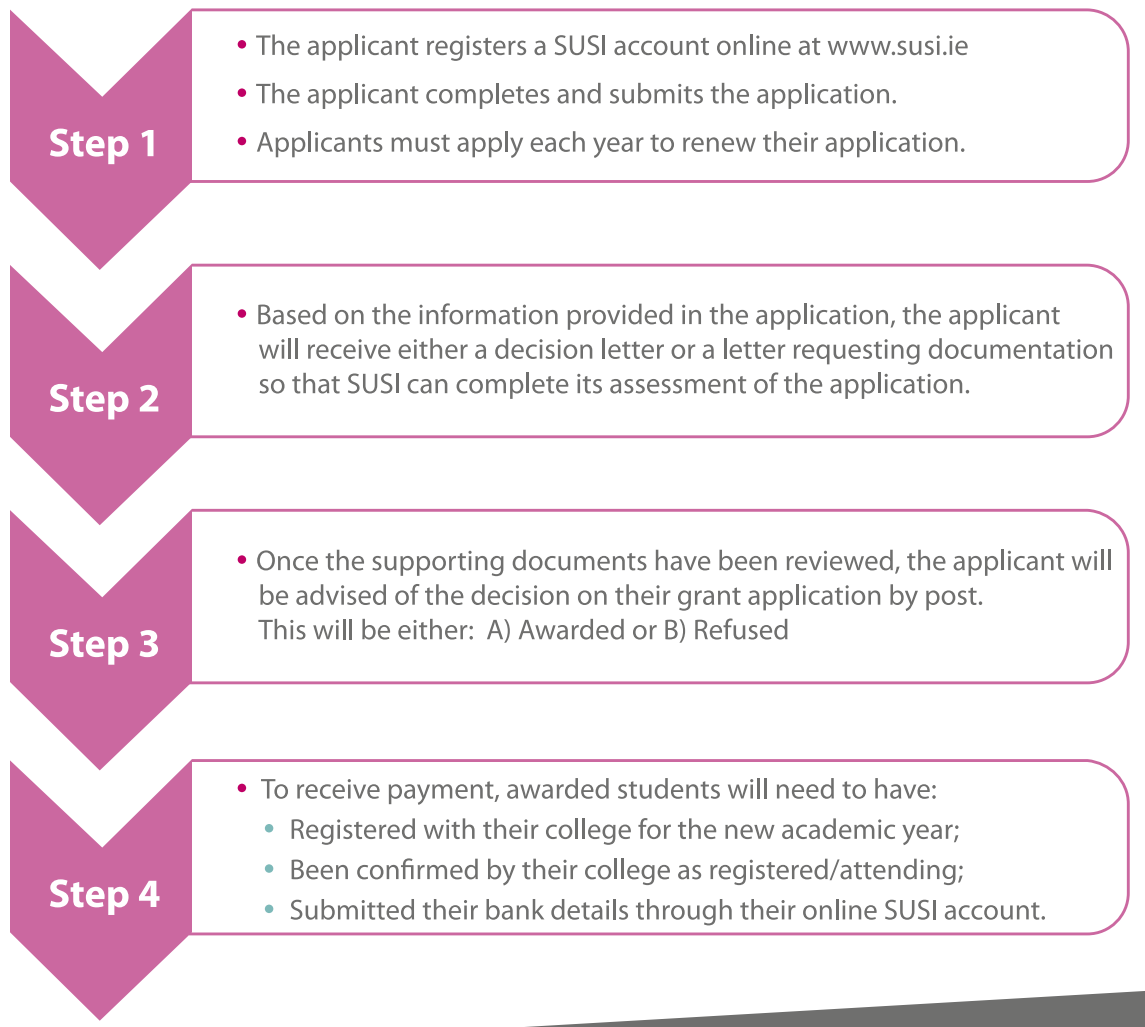
- Applicants must be progressing in education and increasing their National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level.
- Applicants must be attending an approved course in an approved institution.

Income:

- The reckonable income, as calculated for grant purposes, must fall under specific thresholds.
- This income will be a factor in determining what type of funding applicants may receive.
- Applications are assessed with regard to gross household income from the previous year.

HOW TO APPLY

Applications can be made online at www.susi.ie



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Contact us:

- support@susi.ie
- 0761 087 874
- /suisupport
- @susihelpdesk



This article provides an insight into the experience of the leaders of all-Irish schools in the Education and Training Boards sector, both successes and challenges, since the school closures on that fateful day in March 2020. While all schools faced many challenges, school leaders in Irish-medium schools had to deal with certain challenges that were unique to their context.

Introduction

Education is always a hot topic, but since 12 March of this year, Ireland's schools have been under a constant spotlight. In the Education and Training Boards (ETB) sector, at post-primary level there are 245 schools, 48 of which provide education through Irish, including Gaeltacht schools, Gaelcholáistí, and Aonaid Lán-Ghaeilge. While every school in the country faced a variety of challenges, school leaders in all-Irish settings faced additional challenges.

This article provides an insight into the experience of the leaders of all-Irish schools in the ETB sector, both successes and challenges, since the school closures on that fateful day in March 2020. In August 2020 a questionnaire was distributed to those school leaders to share their insights with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The issues raised reflect the views shared by the principals themselves.

Experience of school leaders since 12 March 2020

If you speak to principals from any school in the country at the moment, you are likely to hear of the same experiences: distance learning, Junior Cycle challenges, Leaving Certificate calculated grades, reopening of schools. While all schools have faced similar challenges, all-Irish schools faced additional ones.

From the research carried out to gather the insights of school leaders in all-Irish settings, three themes emerged: communication, technology, and progress of students. While there were lessons to be learned that reinforced practices in schools, there was also an unprecedented workload placed on the shoulders of principals to meet the challenges.

Communication from the DES

The country as a whole had to deal with circumstances that no one expected when Covid-19 hit us. School leaders understood that

Experience of School Leaders in Education and Training Board Irish-Medium Schools during Covid-19

Successes and challenges since 12 March 2020



Gean Gilger
Educational Policy and Development Officer (with responsibility for Irish-medium education), Education and Training Boards Ireland

the Department of Education and Skills (DES) faced a challenge, that difficult decisions would have to be made, and that not everyone would be happy with them. School leaders were deeply disturbed that announcing messages at 4 p.m. on Friday evenings became a norm. It contributed greatly to the dissatisfaction with announcements trickling into the news media. How were these messages in the media before they came to school leaders' desks? It was stressful when parents approached them with enquiries and they lacked the whole story.

The biggest problem facing the leaders of all-Irish schools during Covid-19 was the DES's delay in publishing updates through Irish. Sometimes schools had to wait a week or more for the Irish version to arrive. Some principals said it was disrespectful to all-Irish schools:

It happens too often, and although I would be sympathetic to the Department of Education at the beginning of the process, it is not good enough that this is still happening.

Another said:

“ **The biggest problem facing the leaders of all-Irish schools during Covid-19 was the DES's delay in publishing updates through Irish.** ”

I didn't feel like I was a partner in this challenge. And it has created dissatisfaction and a lack of confidence in the school community.

People may say that the updates were available through English, and what harm if there was a delay, but what good is that when school leaders want to respect their own context and adhere to normal practices and the school's language of communication?

Communication in the school community

In some cases, school leaders said that school community communication practices became better than ever before. Entire staff teams came together online every week, 'which helped a lot to maintain good spirits and support each other'. Regular meetings were held with school senior management teams. Teachers took on additional responsibilities so that pastoral care of students remained the school's priority. School leaders were extremely proud of the 'staff and student approach and involvement'. They referred to the support available from the ETBs, ETBI, and other schools in their board. This network model greatly reassured them because it meant they had constant support available.

Because everyone worked from home, it was challenging for school leaders not to be available – to students, teachers, and parents. Despite the help of assistant principals and deputy principals, they said they were unable to escape the demands of the school community when the schools closed in March. There have always been concerns about the well-being and mental health of teachers and students. Everyone relied on the school leader for the answers – answers that this time were not available and that no one had.

According to school leaders, relationships between schools and parents have changed for the better because of Covid-19. While schools were

making efforts to promote parents' voices, something happened during the pandemic that reinforced that relationship. School leaders said that parents were very appreciative of the efforts made by schools to engage with students and parents, and that schools made every effort to make accurate information available to families.

Technology

Thanks to digital technology, schools have had the opportunity to continue teaching and learning. More teachers than ever before were seen sharing skills, professional conversations were taking place, and 'classroom doors' were opening. Schools could arrange regular meetings with staff, parents, students, and boards of management. One of the many benefits of technology during the pandemic was the capability to celebrate the Leaving Cert class of 2020 graduations online.

Of course, technology also created challenges for schools. No other profession had to change its entire practice overnight when schools were forced to move to remote teaching and learning and the use of digital methodologies.

Not only were school leaders worried about teachers struggling with new methodologies, but there was huge concern for the students themselves. In many all-Irish schools, especially on the islands, 'some teachers and students were operating with little broadband and equipment'. School leaders said there were several weeks at the beginning when students had no access to digital devices or broadband until the schools found ways to provide these.

“ Although the PDST Technology in Education and Scoilnet made tremendous efforts to assist schools, accessing resources through Irish was challenging for some time.

Staff's digital capability – or lack thereof – greatly increased the stress load on school leaders. Although the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Technology in Education and Scoilnet made tremendous efforts to assist schools, accessing resources through Irish was challenging for some time. Teachers spent a lot of time translating resources into Irish.

Many teachers did not have the digital skills required to do distance learning, nor could they be blamed. Aside from schools where technology was embedded in their daily practice, all other schools were under pressure and suffering as a result of the unpreparedness and lack of opportunity to respond appropriately in such a short time frame. No one had realised the day would come when teaching and learning would depend entirely on technology. School leaders felt guilty for not being able to do more for their teachers:

Teachers were stressed, and I didn't think I could give them enough support when I wasn't in school. Also, I teach fifteen classes a week. So, trying to do both was challenging.

While students of this generation are said to be proficient in digital skills, there are many students currently with limited digital skills. School leaders said that students had experience of basic aspects of educational technology, and that teachers as a result had to spend considerable time

guiding students and preparing resources to support them. This put more pressure on teachers and, in turn, on school leaders.

It was students' maturity, independence, strength, and courage that gave school leaders the most satisfaction during the pandemic. Students realised there were new ways to learn and that they were developing new skills. In their feedback, school leaders said many of the students were eager to work and had a positive attitude, though of course there were some who encountered difficulties.

The lack of structure and routine interfered with learning. The new learning habits did not suit some students. A large cohort were 'not involved in their learning'. Every effort was made to support the most vulnerable students, and these efforts were mostly successful, but in some cases they were less effective than was hoped. Student well-being, more so than academic affairs, was every school's main priority.

Decline of competence in spoken Irish

The biggest problem for students in all-Irish schools in terms of progress in their learning was falling behind in their ability to practise speaking Irish. School leaders are worried about

long-term consequences of this gap in direct contact with Irish on the language ability of students in an area outside the Gaeltacht.

“ The biggest problem for students in all-Irish schools in terms of progress in their learning was falling behind in their ability to practise speaking Irish.

Many students at all-Irish schools have parents at home who do not speak Irish. This created huge problems for their progress, because they did not have support with the language at home. During school closures, parents were willing to help their children, but in the case of all-Irish schools, one of the most-needed supports for students was the opportunity to practise their Irish – and unless a parent or guardian had some competence in the language, that support was lost.

School leaders said some teachers were 'turning to English to make sure the work was understood and that parents could support them'. It was challenging for teachers to provide the same support through distance learning compared to the physical immersion setting. Socialisation through Irish also suffered, especially when students were physically unable to come together. There was a tendency for students to turn to English when in contact with their friends.

Plan for the future

The challenges of Covid-19 are far from over, but when leaders in all-Irish schools were asked what plan would they implement if the same events happened again, they were in agreement. The points they raised included an emphasis on planning for distance learning, communication, and student progress.

To undertake distance learning:

- Teachers and students should have the appropriate skills.
- Students and teachers should have access to digital and broadband tools.
- There should be an effective timetable that caters for all students.
- Training should be available for teachers on differentiation in digital classes.

To ensure effective communication:

- Information should be disseminated in a timely manner (and concurrently through Irish as well as English).
- A code of conduct and safety statement should be in place that incorporates distance learning.
- Students should be aware of and clear about a new learning system.

To ensure student progress:

- A support plan should be in place to support the promotion of Irish in the home.
- Pastoral care duties should be shared across the entire staff to lessen the burden on a few.
- Participation should be tracked from the outset to support non-participating students.
- Students should have access to resources and equipment to give them every opportunity.
- Formal supports should be provided for students with special educational needs.

Conclusion

Ireland's school principals must be acknowledged and commended for the efforts they have made to benefit their students, teachers, parents, and the school community. Leaders in all-Irish schools deserve high praise. They faced challenges that other schools may not have understood. Their success was due to their commitment and dedication.

Covid-19 continues to challenge schools. While much progress has been made, school leaders endeavour to enhance and develop practices across all facets of school life. Education and Training Board schools take comfort in the fact that the ETB model provides a constant source of supports, assistance, and guidance. *Ní neart go cur le chéile.*

Responding to Special Educational Needs during the Pandemic

NCSE's response to schools and parents of children with SEN

Since the pandemic, the National Council for Special Education has altered how we work to ensure we reach teachers and parents in different ways through online and distance learning and engagement. We expect this way of working to continue into the future as we provide a more blended approach to supports to schools, students, and parents. This article outlines what we have done, our reflections and feedback on this experience to date, and our initial plans for the future.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has a number of roles, one of which is to support schools to enable students with special educational needs to achieve better outcomes. We do this through providing advice and supports to schools, and advice and professional learning to teachers. In 2019, for example, 16,511 teachers engaged in professional development and learning at NCSE seminars and whole-staff seminars. Our visiting teachers provided additional support to almost 1,300 blind or visually impaired children and 5,584 deaf or hard-of-hearing children in their homes or schools. The Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) delivered thirty-two parent information sessions to almost 630 parents. SENOs also answer any questions that parents or guardians may have and distribute the extensive range of NCSE information leaflets and booklets to them.

With the arrival of Covid-19 and the closure of all schools on 13 March, we had to very quickly reimagine our supports. This involved adapting how these supports were being delivered to parents and teachers, to ensure that children and adults with special educational needs continued to achieve success in the new circumstances. That challenge would be great, considering that over 7,900 students attend special schools and a further 8,400 attend special classes. In addition, over 167,000 students with special educational needs are supported in mainstream schools by 13,400 special education teachers.

As an organisation, we asked ourselves: What do the teachers in each of these settings need? What do these parents need? And most importantly, what do these students need?

Direct school support

First, we looked at how we would continue to provide direct support to teachers. After the schools closed, we converted our existing in-school support service to a telephone-based



Teresa Griffin
CEO, National Council for Special Education

service. Teachers applied via our website, as before, and telephone support was offered whereby staff provided general advice and guidance.

In parallel, we developed a new in-school support portal for whole staff, group, and individual teachers in the school setting. This launched on 1 September, and enables schools to apply for and track their support applications online. Support arising from these applications may be delivered via telephone, email, video conference, or (in circumstances where public health advice permits) a school visit or whole-school seminar.

While this new portal was planned prior to Covid-19, it has become an especially important means by which NCSE's network of advisors can remain available to schools and teachers in the pandemic. It is anticipated that there will be greater reliance, in the short term at least, on telephone and video-conference support than was anticipated when the project was devised. This will be supported by online platforms which we have recently adopted for hosting meetings and seminars, as we continue to modernise how we work.

In addition, SENOs and visiting teachers for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, or blind or visually impaired, continue to maintain contact with schools and parents by telephone and email. For more detail, see <https://ncse.ie/school-support>.

Teacher Professional Learning

The Covid-19 public health restrictions posed a significant challenge to maintaining the delivery of Continuing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL). TPL seminars, which were designed to be delivered face to face, were cancelled, as were planned teacher support visits to schools between March and May.

As it became clear that schools would remain closed for the rest of the academic year, NCSE immediately began to develop a suite of supports for parents and teachers in response to the government's decision that provision of education should continue remotely. These resources, developed by our advisors, visiting teachers, and School Inclusion Model staff, proved very popular with parents and teachers. Three stages were identified as being key areas to support teachers, students, and, for the first time, parents and guardians:

- home learning
- summer programme
- transition back to school.

Home learning

To facilitate this support, we created new spaces on our website containing a wide range of resources suitable for children with special educational needs. This new section was designed to support home learning and contains separate sections for teachers and parents/guardians. See: <https://ncse.ie/parent-resources>. Resources were published weekly during the closure of schools and explored topics such as:

- promoting learning and positive behaviour at home
- general support for learning
- speech, language, and communications
- occupational therapy
- visiting teacher support
- theme of the week, e.g., transitions, science, gardening
- app of the week.

User feedback on these resources was positive, being considered timely and helpful. In particular, the 'theme of the week' received over 16,000 hits. The Parents section of the website has received almost 30,000 hits to date. These statistics suggest that teachers and parents have been engaging with the material.

Summer programme

The NCSE strongly supported the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) decision to have a summer education programme this year and to extend eligibility to include students with disabilities other than a severe or profound general learning disability, or autism. This expansion provided the opportunity to around 15,000 children to take part.

“ **New spaces on our website were designed to support home learning with separate sections for teachers and parents/guardians.** ”

The summer provision is similar to what is usually known as July Provision. The scheme is available to support certain eligible children and takes place in the child's school, their home, or a HSE-led summer programme. The summer programmes gave children an opportunity to continue or to re-engage with learning. The NCSE provided support through resources made available on our website, under two main areas: Guidance and Support for the Summer Programme, and Resources for Teachers.

The 'Getting Back to What You Know' suite of resources for summer provision was created by NCSE and formed part of the summer provision teaching strategies and resources collated by the NCSE and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). These resources focused on fostering resilience in this period of transition by promoting the following five principles, based on the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007):

- a sense of safety
- a sense of calm
- a sense of self-efficacy and community efficacy
- connectedness
- hope.

For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/online-resources-to-support-the-summer-programme>.

This provision was an essential tool in assisting students' transition back into formal learning and enabling them to start recouping lost skills and knowledge. These resources, designed to support the new summer provision, had 2,741 engagements on the website since they were released on 1 July, further highlighting the value of the support provided to teachers by the NCSE.

Transition back to school

In ordinary times, going back to school after the summer holidays can be difficult for some students, especially those with special educational needs. This is particularly the case after a longer-than-usual school closure, as occurred this year. NCSE was very conscious of the heightened need for teachers and SNAs to be supported in that process.

Working with colleagues in the DES, we developed resources and supports which included a suite for young people with complex needs, titled 'Getting Back to What We Know'. Initially designed to support the summer education programme, this resource is now being used in schools since they reopened. Many themed resource booklets for teachers were also created, including 'Promoting Positive Behaviour' and 'Rules and Routines in the Infant Classroom'. For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/resources-to-support-transitions-back-to-school>.

To date, there have been almost 5,000 hits on this section of our website: a clear demonstration of how creating dedicated webpages can greatly facilitate teachers, parents, and students in accessing the resources they need, when they need them.

Human interaction is often a key component in the services we provide.

Delivery of Teacher Professional Learning

As soon as social distancing and other public health restrictions began to emerge, the NCSE began to plan for the online delivery of our Teacher Professional Learning external seminars. In early summer, Adobe Connect was selected as the platform on which these seminars would be delivered in the new school year. The NCSE has held a number of online seminars, including:

- five-day 'Contemporary Applied Behaviour Analysis' (C-ABA), attended by 31 teachers
- one-day 'Principals of Schools Establishing a New Class for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder', attended by 58 principals
- four morning seminars: Introduction to 'Behaviour for Learning', attended by 31 teachers
- three-day 'Organisational skills – Getting it together', attended by 22 teachers
- four-day introductory seminar to autism for teachers of newly established ASD classes, attended by 126 teachers.

The initial feedback to our online seminars has been positive. For example, 82% of participants of the 'Principals of Schools Establishing a New Class for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder' seminar rated the online experience as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

We continue to redesign what were previously face-to-face seminars for the online space. Registration for our calendar of events in term one of the new school year has opened, and we have adopted a new event management system to cater for the transition to online delivery. We continue to monitor public health guidelines, and when safe to do so we may reintroduce some face-to-face seminars for selected courses where corporeal participation is

particularly beneficial. For more details, see: <https://ncse.ie/for-schools/connect-teacher-professional-learning-events-catalogue>.

Looking back and moving forward

The NCSE, like most state agencies, responded quickly to changing needs in a time of crisis. While there has been positive feedback on how we reimagined our supports, we are keen to more thoroughly evaluate what we did, to identify what worked, what did not, and most importantly what parents, teachers, and students found beneficial. As an organisation, we plan to evaluate our initial response to the crisis more formally, and to critically analyse this evaluation so we can make informed decisions on how best to move forward with our services and supports.

There are limitations to the online space for us; human interaction is often a key component in the services we provide. We are acutely aware of these limitations and are working carefully to minimise the impact they will have on our interactions with teachers, parents, and students in the immediate future. Having said this, there are also benefits to online engagement, such as the potential for wider and greater reach. While evaluating this period of change, we will endeavour to capitalise on the opportunity it brings to have a more blended approach in the future. We will continue to try our best to support teachers, parents, and students during these uncertain times.

Dr Brian Mooney and Minister Simon Harris, guest speakers at Higher Options, held in Dublin in November 2020.



Higher Options is an annual three-day education expo for second level students, which takes place in Dublin and is run by *The Irish Times*. The aim is to provide a forum where second level students are assisted in making decisions about their studies by meeting directly with representatives from universities, colleges and education institutions from Ireland, the UK, Europe and beyond. This year the event was virtual.

A recent survey gathered data on Transition Year from coordinators, principals, and deputy principals in thirteen schools in Ireland. The findings provide a useful insight into how Covid-19 has affected the TY programme and underscore how much schools value TY's contribution to students' development. The survey also identifies some concerns and challenges.

Introduction

Not so long ago, an identified challenge facing the Transition Year (TY) was 'to keep refreshing it, to avoid it becoming stale, predictable and boring' (Jeffers, 2018, p. 219). The Covid-19 pandemic has ensured that TY in the current school year is anything but predictable.

During the second and third weeks of November 2020, data from thirteen schools in Ireland were gathered about TY through the eyes of coordinators and some principals and deputy principals. As with any complex picture, various shades, light and dark, emerged.

School context

Rather than see TY as an isolated bubble, most informants immediately wanted to explain the context of schools in the pandemic. One deputy principal said:

It's a hard year. So much school life has been disrupted: schools reconfigured; teenagers wearing masks all day; being confined to pods and zones. Then, so many of the exciting, high-visibility features of Transition Year – the musical, the overnight outdoor pursuits bonding trip, work experience, community service and so on – have been cancelled or postponed. It's anything but normal.

At the same time, many informants noted how pleased students were to return to school. The evidence suggests that many young people found the school closures from March onwards quite difficult (Mohan et al., 2020; Bray et al., 2020). 'The students liked being back in school, in particular connecting with their fellow students and teachers as well as having a regular shape and routine to their day' reflected a widespread view across the thirteen schools.

However, many pointed out that schools are not the same places they were up to March. The restrictions and fear of another closure have

Adapting Transition Year in Response to the Covid-19 Crisis



Gerry Jeffers
Education
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University

“Some coordinators have been criticised, even verbally abused, by members of the public when they see relatively large groups of students out and about.”

changed the atmosphere. Some reported positive and negative sides to this. 'There is less laughter,' commented one principal sadly. 'Students seem more subdued. Maybe we're all a bit subdued,' said a coordinator.

On the other hand, there are reports of young people being more appreciative of school, more respectful towards teachers and towards each other. As one coordinator put it: 'They are learning responsibility and resilience in new ways.' In many classrooms, students are reported as more compliant, more focused on their studies. Some observe that teachers are more cooperative with each other.

Some schools contacted had conducted formal surveys before the mid-term break, checking with students and parents how they perceived TY so far. One coordinator said: 'I worried that back in January, in good faith, we had presented the idea of TY to parents and to students. I was very conscious we were not delivering what we had promised, so I wondered what they thought.'

Survey responses, and anecdotal evidence from other schools, indicate disappointment tempered with realism and satisfaction. As another coordinator put it: 'I think the students know we are doing our best and they appreciate that.' Students interviewed for a radio item related to this research also captured the mixed feelings (RTÉ Radio 1, 2020).

Creative responses

In many of the schools contacted, there is evidence of creative responses to the challenge of ensuring learning experiences that lead to meeting the goals of TY. This involves a lot of hard work. 'You don't just need to have a plan B,' said one coordinator, 'you need C, D, and E.' Another spoke about having planned, back in June, a whole year of external trips, visiting speakers, and activity days. 'Now I've got used to cancellations, re-bookings, thinking on my feet, listening around for fresh ideas and activities, especially as we moved through levels 2, 3, 4, and 5,' she said.

Invention and adaptability manifest in many ways. Outdoor activities have been particularly popular. Individual and small-group activities that allow social distancing, whether on the school grounds or beyond in the countryside, forests, mountains, or by the seashore, continue the tradition of 'learning beyond the classroom' that has been such a distinct feature of TY since its inception. Further examples can be seen in activities such as local studies, gardening, photography, orienteering, community clean-ups, and other environmental pursuits.

Two slight downsides to moving outdoors are worth noting, beyond the obvious unpredictability of Irish weather. One is that some coordinators have been criticised, even verbally abused, by members of the public when they see relatively large groups of students out and about. Perhaps these critics have a narrow view of schooling as something to be confined within the walls of a school building. The phenomenon may also reflect a disturbing strand of the public discourse on the pandemic, which sees

schools primarily as childminding services that enable adults to keep the economy moving.

Secondly, there appear to be different interpretations of the various public health guidelines, including those relating to schools reopening (DES, 2020a). In some cases this has led to additional costs. For example, hiring a fifty-three-seater bus for a day trip from the west of Ireland to Dublin can cost up to €600. Reducing numbers to, say, twenty-six or seventeen can double or treble the cost.

Continuity

Transition Year differs significantly from other school programmes in the level of autonomy each school has to shape its own curriculum (DE, 1993). Specific guidelines for the current school year suggest a four-layered structure of the programme (DES, 2020b). This builds on the concept of the 'TY Onion' developed by the TY Support Services in the later 1990s (TYCSS, 2000). The high-visibility layer of once-off calendar items has been hardest hit by Covid-19 restrictions, with work experience, community service placements, overnight trips to adventure centres, musicals and dramas, and specific workshops being postponed or cancelled.

However, the other three layers are all continuing: TY-specific activities such as modules on mini-company, Global Citizenship education, European Studies, First Aid, Media Studies, etc.; subject sampling for Leaving Certificate choices; and the inner core or continuity layer of subjects such as English, Physical Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education, Gaeilge, and Maths. Project work, oral presentations, and portfolio assessments also continue as before.

“ There appear to be different interpretations of the various public health guidelines, including those relating to schools reopening.”

Visiting speakers still come to schools, sometimes via Zoom. Where possible, some students are getting or planning to get work experience placements, learning about Covid-19 protocols in the workplace. There are perceptible shifts in emphasis, now seeing TY less as a group experience and more of an individual one. Generally, there is a lot of positivity, optimism, and hope about what will be possible in December and after Christmas.

From the earliest research on TY (Egan & O'Reilly, 1979), challenges were evident in maintaining student interest in the continuity subjects. A number of coordinators in the current study referred specifically to teachers making exceptional efforts to engage students in new ways. 'It's as if they are aware that the students are losing out on so many features of TY, so they want to ensure their classrooms are stimulating and provide worthwhile experiences,' observed one. Another said, 'I can see that many teachers have upped their game this year.'

Some of this fresh thinking is in response to the sudden closure of schools on 12 March and the consequent incomplete experience of the Junior Cycle by current TY students. The section in the guidelines (DE, 1993) on Remediation and Compensatory Studies has taken on a new relevance.

Reimagining continuity subjects to align more with the overall goals of TY – increased maturity and autonomy, skills for life, social awareness, and so on – may even become an unexpected development arising from the crisis.

Challenges

While most informants were surprisingly positive – 'I think the students' generosity of spirit and adaptability has been amazing,' concluded one – some serious concerns were also voiced. Not all students have engaged well with TY. Schools in the DEIS programme were more likely to draw attention to this. Some lack of engagement is seen as a consequence of the extended closures. 'I think that, for some youngsters, there was a lot of damage done between March and August when they were left to their own devices, often with no direction,' noted one concerned principal. A coordinator remarked that a notable change this year has been the pastoral demands on his role, with increased referrals of students to the guidance counsellors in the school.

The general well-being of the school community is a persistent worry, especially if the crisis continues. One informant observed that Leaving Cert students are particularly anxious that schools remain open and that they can sit the 2021 Leaving Cert, adding, 'Their concerns percolate downwards through the school.' This may help with compliance on masks and social distancing but doesn't necessarily support mental health.

“ I think that, for some youngsters, there was a lot of damage done between March and August when they were left to their own devices, often with no direction.”

The recent guidelines did emphasise the importance of focusing on well-being as well as health and safety issues (DES, 2020b). 'We front-loaded well-being classes for the first three weeks in September, giving time to hearing the students' concerns, and now we are reaping the benefits of that,' reported a coordinator. Schools that offer a taste in TY of the relatively new Leaving Cert subject Politics and Society are finding those classes excellent spaces to use the pandemic as a lens for learning about how society functions.

The principals interviewed worry about the well-being of staff members, conscious of the strains arising from so much disruption and reimagining. They also fear future closures. When asked about supports, their most frequent positive response referred to a Facebook page for TY coordinators and teachers. Clearly there is a need for the formal support services to schools – Inspectorate, Professional Development Service for Teachers, National Behaviour Support Service, National Educational Psychological Service, etc. – to respond imaginatively to the changing landscape.

Overall, this limited survey confirms how much schools value the Transition Year programme and its goals for students' holistic development, and how they are adapting the flexible guidelines to achieve these outcomes. It also identifies some urgent concerns.

My thanks to the personnel in the thirteen schools who cooperated at short notice and while under considerable pressure.

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NPCPP Leaving Certificate Helpline 2020



Beatrice Dooley, Institute of Guidance Counsellors; Katherine Donnelly, Irish Independent; Norma Foley, Minister for Education & Skills; Mai Fanning, President, National Parents Council Post Primary, Reuban Murray, President, Irish Second Level Students Union.

The NPCPP Leaving Certificate Helpline is a free phone service provided annually to Leaving Cert students and their parents and guardians at the time of issue of Leaving Cert results. The Helpline is staffed by members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, who assist callers with up to date information on issues such as the grades appeals process, reviews and rechecks, CAO applications, non-CAO options and SUSI applications.

The Helpline is sponsored by the Department of Education, Independent Newspapers and Independent.ie, and is supported by SUSI and the GAA.

Reflections on my Junior Cycle Learning Journey during Lockdown

A Transition Year student from Limerick reports on how the pandemic affected her educational experience. Describing the challenges, benefits, and surprises, she counts her blessings and reflects on what could be done differently.

The first time I heard the word 'coronavirus', I was sitting in my living room, swaddled in a blanket, watching the news. It was a grey day in late January, and coincidentally, I had been kept home from school with a bad cough and a temperature. The city of Wuhan had already been locked down, but the virus appeared to have been contained within China. The newsreader listed the symptoms in the tone of a man forecasting the apocalypse, but then, he said everything like that.

The general consensus seemed to be that it was a local problem. Less serious than SARS and MERS, which hadn't been taken terribly seriously in the Western world anyway. No cause for concern. RTÉ News was more interested in the upcoming general election, Greta Thunberg's battle for climate justice, and Brexit.

The fear of the virus arriving in Ireland seemed distant and fuzzy, something that didn't really need to be considered. Epidemics had flared around the globe for as long as I could remember, but my life had never been impacted by them. HIV/AIDS, Zika virus, Ebola ... none of them had ravaged Ireland during my lifetime. It never occurred to me that the coronavirus Covid-19 could.

Less than two months later, on 12 March, the school day fell apart when our PE teacher announced, during a game of dodgeball, that Irish schools and colleges would close for two weeks. The rest of the day was a flurry of booklets, past papers, worksheets, and alternative pre papers being thrust into our hands by anxious teachers. Edmodo and email groups were hastily created. Classes disintegrated into discussion of Covid-19.

Despite the pandemic, and despite the weight of the books we had to haul home, the day had something of a holiday atmosphere. I think the teachers felt it too. It wasn't simply every student's inherent desire to miss as much school as humanly possible – it was relief. School had begun to feel claustrophobic. Hand sanitisers were installed near the lockers, but with 630 girls using them several times a day, they emptied faster than they



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could be refilled. Teachers urged us to wash our hands and to limit our contact with one another, but we were sitting at adjoining desks, 50 cm apart, for 40-minute slots. We were uncomfortably aware that if one of us caught Covid-19, everybody else would swiftly follow suit.

With confirmed cases and Covid-19 deaths mounting, pharmaceutical companies warning of years of waiting before a vaccine could possibly be found, and steady jobs being obliterated overnight, it felt safer to be at home. I attacked my schoolwork and study. Drawing familiar accounts in my Business copy, and revising poems that I had been reciting for years, all had the comfort of repetition. When I read editorials about how our post-Covid lives would be unrecognisable, and nothing would ever be remotely the same, I could open my Irish book and struggle with the *tuiséal ginideach*, reminding myself that, for better or worse, some things would probably never change.

The novelty of online learning wore off surprisingly quickly. I was nervous, at first – anybody who knows me will freely admit that I am utterly useless with technology. I forget to charge my phone, to turn on notifications, to answer texts and return calls when I finally discover their existence, or, most often, I simply forget where my phone is. Navigating online learning felt perilous at first, but I was amazed by how quickly it began to feel natural, and overall, I think I improved.

Whatever form the Junior Cert would eventually take, I was determined to be ready for it. Circumstances may have changed, but my ambition hadn't. I was willing to put in as many hours as I needed to, but I had one concern: at school, I was surrounded by other students, by teachers, by textbooks and copies. Everything was focused towards education. There was nothing to do other than learn. At home, I was surrounded by my own books. The laptop I worked on was stuffed with my favourite songs. On sunny days, the blue sky beckoned, enticing me to stretch out and relax on the soft grass of the garden, or go for a walk by the river and watch the swans take flight. In my resolve to resist temptation, I possibly took things too far in the other direction.

By April, it was clear that we wouldn't set foot in a classroom again until autumn. Among my friends, the general feeling, again, was one of relief. A constant barrage of news from countries that had fared worse than Ireland – Italian doctors forced to turn away patients at hospital doors; Chinese villages building barricades and roadblocks to warn off visitors; mass graves being dug in the US – had left me reluctant to step outside my own front door, to say nothing of stepping through somebody else's. My only concern was the Junior Cert.

The announcement that we would sit exams in September instead of June was unwelcome. I had been counting down the days until summer, and now it seemed that June, July, and August would be spent studying for September, after which we would plunge straight back into ordinary schoolwork. It was another relief when our school decided to set us online assignments instead. It was very different to what had always been done, and I'm certainly not claiming that it was perfect, but then, neither is the ordinary Junior Cert. The changes we've had to make to our lives due to Covid-19 would have seemed extraordinary to me in January, when I heard

the virus's name for the first time. Those changes are extraordinary. My life is different now – some aspects of it are unrecognisable, but for the most part, it isn't any worse.

I am incredibly lucky. I could have been born in a bustee of Kolkata, raised in a Syrian refugee camp, or living in Detroit, watching my community being decimated by Covid-19 while my government turned an indifferent eye. Instead, I was born and raised in Ireland, a country whose government prioritised the health of its citizens. I live in Limerick, a city where I have access to all the goods and services I need, in a spacious, well-built house. Everyone in my family had the space they needed to study and work. We had steady internet and enough devices for us all to use it. Nobody in my family fell ill with the virus, and nobody lost their job.

There are children in this country, in my city, who live in hotel rooms and have to study sitting on their bed. Every time their family speaks, whistles, or turns on the television, their concentration is broken. There are children with learning disabilities who need a different system of teaching to let them learn. There are children who see school as their escape, their gateway to a safer, happier world than home. Those are the children who need our support.

I didn't mind online learning. I quite liked it, in fact. Of course there were moments when I loathed lockdown, when I thought that no number of state exams could ever be as soul-crushing as online assignments, when I felt weighted down by worry. Nobody can spend every second counting their blessings, but when my most severe complaint is that I'm having a rough time with the comprehensive education that I receive from an excellent school, all in the comfort of my own home, and absolutely free of charge, then I think I'm probably doing all right. I spend my life moving between a loving home and an exceptional school. I'm one of a lucky minority in the world who can say that.

“ I have a family that supports me, and teachers who are willing to work all hours of the day (and most of the hours of the night) for the sake of their students.

We haven't vanquished Covid-19. It could easily surge again, and if it does, then schools will have to close. If they do, I'll be all right. I have a family who support me, and teachers who are willing to work all hours of the day (and most of the hours of the night) for the sake of their students. They spent months correcting blurry photographs of papers, creating YouTube channels to show us practical demonstrations of what they taught, typing out page after page of revision material, answering the panicked emails we sent them at ungodly hours ... I'm not going to suffer from a lack of care.

We haven't vanquished Covid-19, but for now we have controlled it. We saved our health service from collapse. We rallied, we made sacrifices, we protected each other. We proved that when we value one another, we can accomplish incredible things.

Minister Foley spoke with the best intentions when she maintained that 'there is no Plan B' for online learning. But if we truly value education, if we really believe in the potential of our children, then we must create such a plan. Online learning must be inclusive, it must be effective, and it must let every child know that they are valued.

There has been much focus over the last decade on the challenges and successes in the school system in Ireland to adapt to the needs of trans young people. This article demystifies the complexities of trans healthcare, physical and mental, through a review of the research. It also highlights the experiences of families of trans people and outlines some of the supports available for trans young people and their families.

Introduction

It is an enormous honour to be asked to contribute to *Ireland's Education Yearbook* about transgender young people's experiences in post-primary schools. There has been much focus over the last decade on the challenges and successes in the school system to adapt to the needs of trans young people. I hope this article will help you to meet the needs of this marginalised group in the Irish post-primary school system. I am also conscious that Covid-19 has impacted society in many ways and that many of us have experienced unprecedented challenges. School closures have been very difficult for teachers. In this article I highlight some of the ways that the pandemic has affected the lives of trans young people.

On a positive note, 2020 has seen the launch of the first trans-specific research into the experiences of young trans students in post-primary education. I will highlight some of the key findings, including peer-reviewed research into the healthcare aspects. Much of the information on trans healthcare has been portrayed through a sensationalised and polarised lens; I aim to demystify the complexities of trans healthcare for young people. Finally, I want to draw attention to the experiences of families of trans people, highlighting the challenges and messages of hope that emerge constantly in my work with these resilient families. I write this article as a first-person narrative to acknowledge my personal connection to these experiences, as I am not fully detached from this work.

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) has been working with primary and post-primary schools in Ireland since 2013. During those seven years, there have been many learning opportunities for both the school system and ourselves as a trans NGO. We greatly appreciate the school management bodies, teacher unions, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), and others who have acted as a bridge from us, as representative body, to the schools, towards the outcome of young trans people feeling supported in their schools.

Emerging from the Shadows

Transgender young people in Irish schools



Vanessa Lacey

Health and Education Manager, Transgender Equality Network Ireland

TENI's aim is to facilitate the needs of young people to engage with schoolwork, and to reduce anxiety to allow them to remain in the school environment. TENI's approach has always been a 'wrap-around' one in which the young people are central. We focus on meeting students' holistic needs, which includes collaborating with those around them to better support them. Our first step is often taken with the school itself through a guidance counsellor, pastoral carer, or principal or deputy principal. TENI arranges to bring the key people together on a visit to the school, which includes a one-hour trans information presentation to the staff. During this visit, TENI engages with key teaching and supporting staff members, the young person, parents or guardians, and in some situations their local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) healthcare provider.

This holistic, person-centred approach enables the young person to focus on schoolwork rather than the uncontrollable stressors they may experience. In our experience, schools are mainly supportive of the young person and view that support in a pastoral role, ensuring that equitable conditions for attaining education are readily available.

It can be challenging for TENI to relay vital information to school staff in the short time allocated. We are working on initiatives to allow more time for teaching staff to facilitate their needs. In 2018, TENI partly addressed this issue by hosting the first Transgender Education Conference in Waterford, funded by Healthy Ireland. This full-day event was attended by over 200 school staff; presenters included management body representatives, researchers, teaching college lecturers, young trans students, and healthcare professionals. An evaluation highlighted that similar conferences need to be held throughout Ireland. This was the plan before Covid-19.

Research findings

Since late 2017, TENI has partnered with the University of Limerick and the Irish Research Council to research the post-primary-school experiences of transgender and gender-diverse youth in Ireland. This robust and rigorous project included several workshops and engaged fifty-four participants, including young trans people, parents, and stakeholders such as school staff. The project team included Dr Ruari Santiago-McBride (research fellow), Dr Aoife Neary (principal investigator and academic mentor), Dr Breda Gray (consultative academic mentor), and Dr Vanessa Lacey (placement mentor).

The research identified vital information from a variety of voices and perspectives. Here, John comments on his lack of prior knowledge about trans issues:

I had not really thought about [gender diversity] until this particular student [transitioned]. ... My initial reaction was, I do not understand. I do not understand that. You need to explain that to me more. And I had a conversation with her, and it made sense. It just made sense. (John, school leader, co-educational community school)

The key findings included robust evidence that all the young trans and gender-diverse [TGD] participants felt marginalised in their schools. This was linked to (a) lack of discussion on gender identity, (b) absence of representation of TGD people, and (c) lack of LGBTI+ supportive

spaces. These factors contributed to a sense of shame about their gender identity, because trans issues were not validated in any way in the school environment. Subsequently, TGD young students decided to repress their identity, which had a negative impact on self-esteem issues and minority stress, and ultimately school retention.

The comment below from a young trans person emphasises the positive impact of a principal who was open to trans information:

The principal was very considerate, very understanding. She knew I was having trouble, struggling a bit. She was just very understanding about it. She knew it was something that wasn't really addressed by the school and needed to be. So in that sense, she was very eager to please, she was very helpful. (Molly, eighteen, co-education community school)

Most informants said they 'came out' to a member of school staff. Some had a negative reaction, when the staff member seemed to invalidate their gender identity. However – and extremely positively – most young people said that their coming out to a member of staff received an affirming response. In research on the experiences of young (and older) trans people, positive experiences are not often highlighted. This finding needs to be acknowledged, highlighted, and celebrated, and TENI applauds Irish school staff for taking such an affirming approach, in the main. This response has major significance, as it facilitates the young person to remain in school and seek the necessary supports to attain a full education.

Another key finding highlighted the challenges in transition experienced by respondents. Negative experiences include misgendering, misnaming, restrictive uniforms, bathroom accessibility issues, staff prejudice, peer bullying, barriers to sports, and lack of supports. It is vital that these be addressed urgently in the Irish post-primary school system and that appropriate school policies and practices be ushered in.

The recommendations from the young people in this study emphasised the urgency of making changes to uniform policy concerning gender identity, single-staff toilets, zero tolerance of transphobic bullying, and the establishment of LGBTI supports to ensure that schools are a welcoming environment for trans people. Other key recommendations included that their identified names and pronouns be respected and used, to validate their identity; that there be proactive periodic engagement with young people and stakeholders; and that designated staff members liaise for the young trans person during the vulnerable period of transition.

The need for training in this area for all staff members was another key finding. TENI welcomes further engagement from schools to liaise with them – we can offer the wrap-around support necessary.

[My child] wouldn't eat breakfast and wouldn't have had a cup of tea, so that he wouldn't have to use the toilet. Which is pretty dire, isn't it? (Esther, parent of a fifteen-year-old trans boy)

The comment above shows the direct impact of barriers to accessing appropriate toilet facilities in schools for trans youth. A similar comment was made at the education conference in Waterford in 2018. It is very

common for young trans people to restrict their intake of food and liquids. This has serious medium- to long-term physical effects on their growing bodies, as well as major negative psychological effects.

Overarching this report are the key recommendations for future directions in the school system: establishment of a working group with key stakeholders; development of gender-identity and gender-expression policy for all Irish schools; and explicit inclusion of gender identity in schools, including teacher pre- and post-service training and inclusion of trans people in the school curriculum. Addressing these goals would potentially meet the needs of young people who experience gender identity issues and help them feel comfortable in their school environment, which will support them in realising their full potential.

Access to transgender healthcare was also reported in the study. All trans respondents and parents said they had negative experiences with this. Currently in Ireland, there is a HSE-funded service for adults that is based in Co. Dublin. To access it, one can be referred by a GP, but waiting times are reported at more than two years. For adolescents struggling with their gender identity, there is a start-up service in Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin (OLCHC). This service has a limited number of staff and currently no mental health specialties.

Mental-health assessments are offered by the Gender Identity Service in the UK (GIDS), also known as Tavistock. This service is funded through the HSE Treatment Abroad Scheme, as it is deemed a medical necessity and is not currently available in Ireland. The current pathway for adolescents (and children) is to be referred to their local CAMHS teams by GP, and then a consultant referral to GIDS. It usually takes about six months. Once GIDS receives the referral, there is a further two-year wait for a first assessment. The international protocol for prescribing puberty suppression is at least six assessments with an experienced clinician and informed by a multi-disciplinary team. A young person may therefore have to wait three to four years to receive support and undertake an assessment that may or may not lead to puberty suppression.

Less than 50% of young people assessed by GIDS continue on to puberty suppression. It is considered only after prolonged assessment and with multidisciplinary team support. Current research indicates that this treatment option is deemed a medical necessity for some young people, as it allows them to focus on other aspects of life without experiencing significant anxiety about their incongruent developing physical body (De Vries et al., 2014).

Despite misinformation in some elements of the media and social media in Ireland, there is no fast track to puberty suppression, and those receiving treatment options recommended by the Endocrine Society are few. There are only twenty adolescents currently on this regime, and all have been through an extended and rigorous waiting time and robust assessments. This evidence suggests that OLCHC is prescribing puberty suppression supervised by qualified clinicians to 0.0004% of the Irish population. The same treatment is given to children who undergo precocious puberty.

I hope this section has demystified some aspects of trans healthcare. If you need any further information, I would be delighted to help; my email is vanessa@teni.ie.

Families of trans young people

Families play a crucial role during all stages of gender transition (Emerson, 1996; Lev, 2004; Zamboni, 2006; McGuire et al., 2016). They form a key part of the assessment, and their involvement and support are crucial for positive outcomes for their child, whether they go on to medically transition or not (Olson et al., 2015). It is important to ensure that the young person's gender identity is validated in all aspects of life, including at school and in their families. Family members are essentially the spine of the support network for their vulnerable young person, especially given the high rates of suicide and self-harm among trans young people (McNeill et al., 2012, 2013).

TENI's wrap-around model is one of the most important areas of our work, and we regularly see the impact of acceptance or rejection on the development of young trans-identifying people. We wholly acknowledge the challenges for families of gender-transitioning loved ones to accept the gender-identity changes. Families can experience a range of effects, including grief and loss (Norwood, 2013; Wahlig, 2014; McGuire et al., 2016). Some effects can bring confusion or conflict and are at times perceived as transphobic, whereas in many situations family members may lack understanding of the issues.

TENI engages closely with parents, family members, guardians, and healthcare professionals to put scaffolding in place to support those loved ones close to the trans young person. In 2011 TENI developed TransParenCI (Trans Parents Connect Ireland), which offers crucial supports to families of trans people. There are currently six TransParenCI groups in Ireland (Dublin South, Dublin North, Waterford, Cork, Kerry, Cavan/Monaghan), who meet each month – online during the pandemic.

TENI also provides several workshops annually, including a residential weekend for families of trans people, which includes a seminar on healthcare featuring healthcare providers, workshops on mental health, and an evening celebration event for all the family. The key component of this weekend is 'universality' (Yalom, 1995): families do not feel alone but can share their experiences with others.

TransParenCI has a subgroup named Transformers, aimed at young people aged thirteen to twenty. This initiative is a key part of TENI's work, and we are very proud of TransParenCI and Transformers. TENI offers many workshops to Transformers, focused mainly on developing resilience, because of the lack of control that trans young people may experience.

I hope you now have a better insight into some of the challenges facing young trans people in post-primary schools in Ireland. TENI endeavours to support young people through their challenges, and the Transformers are vital in ensuring that proper, evidenced supports are available. For instance, in the earlier days of public health restrictions due to Covid-19, we offered weekly online support rather than the monthly groups, to ensure that our

young people were supported during this unprecedented period in all our lives.

Our Transformers facilitators recognised that many young trans people were experiencing less anxiety rather than the expected increase during the restrictions. The main factor in this was that trans young people, required to stay at home, were not experiencing the real and perceived negative daily comments about their gender identity. Unfortunately, as restrictions were lifted, the anxiety became worse than before, due to the false sense of security experienced in that period.

Our current focus is on helping our trans young people develop resiliency and confidence to re-emerge into society, especially the school environment. We have developed an initiative called 'walk and talk', where we organise walks in nature and talk about mental health, while adhering to public health measures. We were unsure how the young people would experience the initiative, but evaluation indicates rave reviews. We aim to continue these each month, and hopefully we can keep providing the vital support needed to help fill the seemingly uncontrollable aspects in their lives. In the school environment, TENI will continue to support educators as always, and we look forward to supporting you in helping our young trans people emerge from the shadows. Thank you!

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As we enter the final decade of action on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and struggle to respond to global challenges, learning about global citizenship issues has never been more important. This article provides an overview of the place of the SDGs in post-primary education and of the response by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) to supporting its schools to engage in teaching and learning about education for sustainable development throughout the school environment.

The concept of sustainable development is not new and has undergone many iterations and changes of emphasis over the last few decades. More recently, the Brundtland Report (1987) provided an 'official' definition and in its simplest form proposes that 'sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (p. 41). The current application of this definition comes in the form of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Signed into being in August 2015, these Global Goals were for the first time historically adopted by all 193 member states of the UN.

The seventeen Goals, aimed at ending poverty, reducing inequality, and tackling climate change, by 2030, are underpinned by a set of 169 targets. These targets provide not only a formal mechanism for achieving the goals but also a measure of their progress and success, by giving a detailed list of specific challenges while also supporting engagement on a more personal level. While the Goal aligned to Climate Change (SDG 13) has gained much prominence in recent years, the agenda for collective engagement and action is clear. Despite certain challenges seeming more urgent, the aspiration for success must be channelled collectively through all the Goals – engaging in a partnership for progress.

While the vision for the SDGs was negotiated at an international level, the objectives and targets need to be enacted and achieved at national and even local level. It is this potential for local action that set the seed for engagement with sustainable development education within the Education and Training Boards (ETB) sector.

Embedding the Sustainable Development Goals in Teaching and Learning

Education and Training Boards Ireland: Take 1 Programme



Valerie Lewis
Educational Policy
and Development
Officer, Education
and Training
Boards Ireland

Take 1 Programme: 'No one will be left behind'

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contained a pledge that 'no one will be left behind' (UN, 2015, p. 1), and while it is seldom disputed in principle, in practice it presents many challenges. Student activism, particularly the climate strikes, has been evident both in Ireland and globally over the last number of years. Taking to the streets as part of an organised outcry, these young people force us all to reflect on the future of our planet. However, representative does not necessarily mean inclusive, and it is important that all our students in all our classrooms be presented with an opportunity for engagement. This engagement can take many formats and may not necessarily result in strikes or public demonstrations. It is this principle of inclusion and the belief that no one should be left behind that underpins the basis for the development of the Take 1 Programme.

With the mission of inclusivity at its core, the aim of Take 1 is to promote ETB schools as Sustainable Development Goal schools, providing a programme of awareness-raising about all seventeen Goals, encouraging the linking of formal and non-formal activities relating to the Goals and supporting schools to work towards including the SDG agenda in their well-being programmes. When the Take 1 Programme launched and training

commenced in October 2019, Covid-19 had not yet raised its head in Ireland, but there were many other challenges to introducing another intervention into an already busy school environment.

Taking account of these challenges, Take 1 works towards developing activities which sit within the curriculum by providing real and operable engagement underpinned by school needs. Key to its success is not only to make the data about the seventeen goals available and understandable, but to highlight how embedding teaching and learning about the Goals can potentially be aligned to already existing learning outcomes.

“ Each day-long training provides an overview of the SDGs, analysis of where schools are at in relation to sustainable development education, and planning for integration at classroom and management level.

In its first year the focus was primarily but not exclusively on the Junior Cycle curriculum, offering school leaders the opportunity to engage with contemporary issues that are currently challenging our young people and teaching staff. Training delivery replicates the model operated by ETBI, requiring the attendance of a principal or deputy in combination with the interested teachers, reflecting the key messages of many of the policy approaches of the education sector. This explicit commitment to collaborative and creative improvement across the school environment is supported by educational research which notes that school leadership is considered the second-greatest influence on student learning, second only to teacher effectiveness (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

The issues and information encompassed by sustainable education are wide-ranging and potentially complex, often informed solely by media headlines. The Take 1 model engages schools, students, and teachers in a flexible learning approach, ensuring that schools can adopt and adapt the programme as a built-in model which can be sustained as it grows. Each day-long training provides an overview of the SDGs, analysis of where schools are at in relation to sustainable development education, and planning for integration at classroom and management level.

Resources shared with attendees replicate the information from the training sessions and provide a mapping plan for the Junior Cycle curriculum. This mapping analysed the syllabus for each Junior Cycle subject, highlighting where content is already aligned to sustainable development and the SDGs and ensuring that additional content sourcing is kept to a minimum. This alignment to learning outcomes reflects the core principle of inclusion by offering the learning to all students in all class groups.

Following initial training, participants were encouraged to explore opportunities to put the approach into practice through one or more subject areas. This work was then showcased during Take 1 Week (2–6 December) and promoted using visuals, photographs, and activities, shared on social media with the hashtag #ETB_SDGS. Subsequent data analytics showed the breadth and range of engagement showcasing SDG learning in fifteen subject areas across schools throughout the ETB sector.

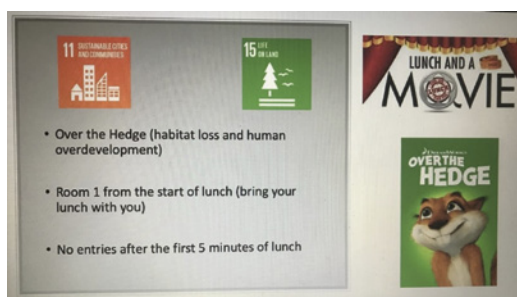
This analysis also provided information on the flexible approach used by different schools. In the formal curriculum, one school chose to concentrate on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), using case studies to explore the gender pay gap and issues of economic growth in their Business Studies class. This learning was supported by a visit from a guest speaker, Kevin Hyland, who had been pivotal in leading efforts to include text on human trafficking and modern slavery in the transcript of the original SDG agreement. All these activities mapped to the learning outcomes in Strand 3 of the syllabus.

Other formal applications included the use of recycled materials to make prototypes in Engineering classes, while Home Economics students investigated the impact of food choices from ecological and ethical perspectives (LO 1.15) and applied sustainable practices to the selection and management of food and material resources (LO 1.16) (NCCA, 2017, p. 15). These learning outcomes not only are formal aspects of the syllabus but also align to several SDGs, which can be referenced throughout the learning: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Schools also engaged in learning about the SDGs in the non-formal and extracurricular space by selecting relevant books and films for lunchtime club activities, planting a school garden, collaborating with local volunteer



Students from Coláiste an Átha, Gorey, Take 1 Week, December 2019.



Students from Griffeen College, Lucan, learn about SDGs over lunch during Take 1 Week.

organisations, and using recycled materials to make gifts for the Christmas market. Where several teachers engaged in activities during Take 1 Week, awareness was raised through the entire school community, across several subjects, inside and outside the classroom, with capacity for engagement by all.

The visual and verbal feedback showed strong evidence of the ease with which learning about SDGs can be integrated into the school environment. Providing a resource that maps the learning outcomes to the SDGs ensures that each teacher has the relevant alignment to hand, and at a minimum only needs to highlight how the existing content already encompasses sustainable development elements. It also supports a move away from, but not exclusive of, the notion that sustainable education teaching and learning are addressed only through subjects like Geography and Civic, Social and Political Education.

This embedded approach acknowledges and embraces the importance of learning about all seventeen SDGs and how their interconnected nature is vital for their continued impact and success. While addressing issues of climate action (SDG 13) and climate justice may seem to be the more public face of students' concerns, for a student already grappling with issues of hunger and poverty (SDG 1 and SDG 2), addressing issues of climate justice might not be their immediate priority. It is equally important to explore and understand how working towards achieving one Goal can have an impact on many others.



Aligning the SDG key themes to the core values of ETB schools

There is also an opportunity to demonstrate how the Global Goals and their aspiration for inclusion reflect the core values of the ETB sector. As part of the initial preamble to the introduction to the SDGs, five key areas reflect the overall themes of the sustainable agenda: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. These 'five Ps' present a more inviting comprehension of sustainability, while also aligning with the core values of ETB schools: Excellence in Education, Respect, Care, Equality, and Community. This natural association supports the sector in making connections to voice support for the Global Goals, to make decisions that advance them, and to take actions to help with their implementation.

Policy integration

The Take 1 Programme also takes cognisance of national policy in both the education and sustainable development arenas and aims to align with existing objectives and aspirations. Goal 1 of the Action Plan for Education 2019 supports a quality learning experience 'so that learners can respond to the changing opportunities they will face in the future' (DES, 2019, p. 16).

Embedding learning about sustainable development and global citizenship, as a natural extension of the curriculum, supports this future-proofing. Similarly, Take 1 attends to the proposed awareness-raising aspiration of the SDG National Implementation Plan (2018–2020) as well as key areas of Education for Sustainability: The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014–2020 (DES, 2014).

An interim report on progress in 2018 commended the work done to date but also noted that the 'lack of system-wide awareness of the strategy must be rectified and further action must be taken to communicate, raise awareness of and embed ESD [Education for Sustainable Development]' (DES, 2018, p. 44). It is clear that despite many of these well-placed interventions, practice on the ground does not yet fully reflect policy objectives.

At school level, the framework document Looking at Our School 2016 is designed to 'support the efforts of teachers and school leaders, as well as the school system more generally, to strive for excellence in our schools' (DES Inspectorate, 2016, p. 5). Leadership and Management (Domain 1) encourages the promotion of a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation, and creativity in learning, teaching, and assessment, while the statements of practice in Teaching and Learning encourage teachers to value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration.

“ Schools that are beginning on their sustainable-education journey can be supported and mentored by schools that are further along.

The Take 1 Programme model of training – teacher and leader learning professionally and then sharing that learning at school level – will add value to all levels of leadership practice. Looking at Our School also highlights the value of students as active agents in their learning who engage purposefully in a wide range of learning activities and respond to learning opportunities. The Take 1 Programme, in responding to contemporary issues, supports schools in assuming responsibility for education which is explicitly learner-centred while valuing and reflecting student voice. While impact and change may be varied, the intention to be responsive and current should be viewed as highly valuable in the school community.

Building for the future

ETBs are well placed to operate towards a collaborative approach in their sector. Each ETB has a director of schools who has a role in the leadership of teaching and learning in schools, and this coordinating role provides a natural cohesion to the work of individual schools. Schools that are beginning on their sustainable-education journey can be supported and mentored by schools that are further along, and this model can be enhanced by the work of each school feeding into the work of each ETB, which can be shared across the network of sixteen ETBs. The various forum and network groups already in operation in this sector provide a wealth of embedded experience throughout the system.

While the first year of the Take 1 Programme made a significant impact, there is enormous potential for further growth both within and outside the sector. Resources are being developed to reflect the syllabus content and learning outcomes of the Senior Cycle curriculum, including the Leaving

Certificate Applied. At either end of this spectrum, the Goodness Me Goodness You Programme in ETB Community National Schools presents an ideal opportunity to embed Take 1, while the further education arena provides capacity to develop the learning through education, apprenticeship, and training modules. The training programme will continue to grow, offering opportunities for new participants while also supporting skilled practitioners to continue to build on their learning.

Take 1 Week will be celebrated again on 23–30 November 2020, when we hope to witness the continued growth of sustainable development education for all members of our school communities.



Take 1: Year in review

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2020 ESB TechSpacer of the Year



11-year-old Shaun Samra from Finglas, Co Dublin, won the top award at the 2020 ESB Creative Tech Fest.

An aspiring rap artist, Shaun's entry, *Anxiety*, told the personal story of the impact of Shaun's struggles with anxiety on both himself and his family.

The 2020 ESB TechSpacer of the Year event took pace virtually on October 28.

Disrupting the Traditional Global Education System

Mike Feerick's speech at the WISE conference

Education Disrupted, Education Reimagined was the theme of this year's World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) virtual conference held in June 2020. The following is an excerpt from the address delivered at the conference by guest speaker Mike Feerick:

Disrupting the Traditional Global Education System

"The education system is in crisis. Covid-19 isn't the cause, it was already in crisis. The fact is that 93% of people have never been to college and so we need an education system that is far more accessible. We need to educate everybody and we need to educate them now. The systems that are there are just too slow, too expensive, and they can't reach everyone.

"I believe that the current system is overdue for disruption. I also believe in the promise of what's possible, which has been brought about by technology and the fact that people are actually willing to use technology. Because while technology may change, behaviour often lags behind.

"It's possible to put all knowledge and skills training online for free. Alison has nearly 16 million learners, 3 million graduates, and about 2,000 free courses. We're not just talking about it, we're doing. Anyone can go onto Alison and study for free. It's a working model, going for thirteen years. We've proven it – you can create a scalable, sustainable platform for free education.

"But it's not just about free education. We're also in the publishing business. Many people don't realise that on the Alison platform there's a whole publishing universe where people learn how to use our publishing tool for free. They can then publish in any language, on any subject, at any level, and get their content out to anyone worldwide. So we have a situation now in which technology is allowing us to present knowledge for free to learners, and also to give everybody the tools and the training to publish knowledge for free. We have reached a world where everyone can be a teacher, and everyone a learner.

"We're trying to create a world where there's a free flow of knowledge and skills training. We're trying to drive all costs of education down to zero. And we're succeeding. And how we're doing it is to



Mike Feerick
Founder and CEO
of Alison.com

scale the platform. We only have to make cents from every individual who comes on the website, through advertising, to pay our bills.

“We’re disrupting an education business worth \$4 trillion. We’re driving costs to zero so, hopefully, we can reduce the education of adults down to a business that’s in the billions, not in the trillions. This releases an enormous amount of money that would be available for other important things.

“Now if you can learn anything anywhere you can be tested on anything anywhere. I’ve said that 93% of the world has never been to college. So how do we assess how smart they are? A lot of companies around the world talk about skill shortages and why wouldn’t there be when they are only hiring college graduates who make up 7% of the world? How then do we assess how smart people are around the world? The truth is that we can do this.

“In the US in particular, there’s a lot of companies that are no longer looking to formal education when it comes to hiring people. They’re setting them tests – personality tests, cognitive skills tests, testing their verbal reasoning, numeracy reasoning, abstract reasoning. These tests have always been expensive but the truth is they can be free. We’ve launched a free personality test on Alison and we’ll have free cognitive skills tests online later this year.

“What this enables the world to do is for everyone to be able to find out how smart they are in various different ways and to be able to present this information to an employer.

“Self-knowledge is key because there’s an enormous amount of people around the world being told they’re not smart unless they’ve paid a college an awful lot of money and received a piece of paper. But we all know this isn’t true. So how do we bring these people into play? We can identify what their strengths and weaknesses are and develop them. We can assess just how smart they are via these tests and in that way make them available for potential hiring and development online. It allows the whole world to engage.

“And then on the other side, what we can do is go to the employers. Most employers hire in a very lazy way. They put out a short job description and description of the person they want to hire. And they go from there. But actually they can do a lot better. Through our system, they could ask a lot more questions and at the same time, open up their hiring to the world.

“I believe that there’s a change coming in education and training that is going to be a tsunami. The example I often come back to is that, in 1900, the motor car was just invented and made up only 5% of transport in the US. By 1920, only 5% was not motorised and the entire carriage industry was gone. You’re going to see the same thing in education because the technology is here, the systems are free, and people need them.”

Science in Action



Pictured in the Immunology Lab in Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute (TBSI), where innovative and interdisciplinary approaches are leading to scientific discoveries of biomedical importance, ultimately giving rise to better patient care:

Prof Patrick Prendergast, Provost; Prof Aideen Long; Prof Luke O'Neill; Minister Simon Harris; Prof Kingston Mills; AIB CEO Colin Hunt.



The **Irish Science Teachers' Association, Eol Oidí na hÉireann**, is the professional association for teachers of science in the Republic of Ireland. As such it is represented on the relevant subject development groups of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Since its foundation in 1961 it has been providing continuous professional development and support for its members at both national and branch levels.

The Association has close affiliations with the Association for Science Education in the UK and is a founding member of ICASE, the International Council of Associations for Science Education. It is also represented on SCIENTIX which promotes and supports a Europe-wide collaboration among STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) teachers, education researchers, policymakers and other STEM education professionals.

Members are also supported and informed of developments through the Association's website (www.ista.ie) and through its Journal, SCIENCE, which is posted to members three times per annum.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz - held during Science Week since 1990 and the Annual Conference which provides members with the opportunity to hear and meet national and international experts in areas relevant to science education. Due to the current pandemic, the next conference is scheduled to be held online on **Saturday 27th March 2021**. Our current Honorary President is Prof Luke O'Neill.



For up-to-date information visit:

Website: www.ista.ie

Twitter: @IrishSciTeach

Facebook: IrishScienceTeachersAssociation

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Further Education & Training ⁴

Apprentice Employer Incentivisation Scheme

Simon Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Dr Mary Liz Trant, Executive Director, SOLAS, attended the launch of the Apprentice Employer Incentivisation Scheme in July 2020.

Announced as part of the government's July jobs stimulus package, the scheme provides for a €3,000 payment for each new apprentice who is registered by eligible employers.



Further Education and Training in 2020

A year of immense challenge but emerging opportunity



Andrew Brownlee
Chief Executive Officer, SOLAS

The effects of Covid-19 and the looming threat of Brexit show the importance of a strategic and agile FET system. ETBs and other FET bodies have responded admirably to the challenges of 2020, while the creation of the new government department and its launch of a new FET strategy point to an exciting future for the sector, as this article reports.

In common with just about every aspect of the world we live in, 2020 has been an unprecedented and challenging year for further education and training (FET). Our ways of working, and of accessing and engaging in learning, have fundamentally changed during the course of the year, and it seems increasingly likely that there will be a permanent legacy and impact, even if the threat from Covid-19 diminishes over time.

The initial changes happened virtually overnight, when the first lockdown was announced in March, closing all FET facilities with immediate effect. The core aim across SOLAS, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and other FET providers was to ensure that learners were protected and could continue, as far as possible, to access learning and support throughout this period. Alternative assessment approaches were in place to allow them to complete their courses and receive certification.

We worked closely with government and all our relevant stakeholders to coordinate an effective emergency response. Key aspects included:

- *Continuation of Teaching and Learning:* Ensuring, as far as possible, that online learning opportunities were available to learners during this period when FET facilities were physically closed. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) conducted a survey of ongoing FET provision, which found extensive adoption by ETBs of online resource development and delivery (through Moodle, Teams, Class Notebooks, and OneNote) to continue to offer learning, and also the use of physical resource packs for those without access to required technology.
- *Alternative Assessment:* Ensuring that ETBs had alternative assessment arrangements in place where possible, with ETBI agreeing a sectoral approach and engaging with higher education (HE) to facilitate FET-HE transitions.
- *eCollege:* Opening up of eCollege, the FET online learning portal, offering a portfolio of

digital and other online courses free of charge to any learners who wish to avail of them. This has been extremely successful, with over 30,000 engaging in these courses during the year, which all come with dedicated eTutor support.

- **Learner Support:** Strong continued engagement with vulnerable learners through ETBs and community education partners, with regular telephone contact made, learning packs issued, access provided to devices, and regular guidance offered. The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) established a Freephone advice and support service, and introduced further online resources, for those with literacy and numeracy difficulties. Adult guidance services also remained open via online and telephone access during this period to provide advice and support.
- **Funding:** Frontloading of funding to ETBs and other FET providers to ensure they had sufficient finances to sustain operations through the initial period of lockdown. Funding was also provided to protect learners due to complete FET courses by continuing to guarantee their allowances for the closure period. As FET facilities began to reopen, additional funding was allocated by government to cover additional costs of meeting public health and social distancing guidelines, and to facilitate access to technology by their learners to enable online learning.
- **New Skills Initiatives:** Supporting the development of new courses by ETBs to meet the Covid-19-related challenges, including one on infection control to support a pipeline of potential healthcare workers, and another on management through remote working.

All of this work was complex yet critical, and the key to success lay in the strong working relationships across all of the key organisations. This was helped by a range of tertiary-education system response structures put in place to facilitate common approaches and solutions across both FET and higher education. Particular thanks must go to the incredible staff working across FET, who went above and beyond to ensure that learning kept flowing and learners and apprentices continued to be supported.

The value of this comprehensive and coordinated response is borne out by the fact that at the time of writing, as 2020 draws to a close, the number of learners benefiting from FET during the year – approximately 200,000 unique learners across the system – has remained largely on a par with 2019, with participation from some of the most vulnerable target groups also at similar levels to last year.

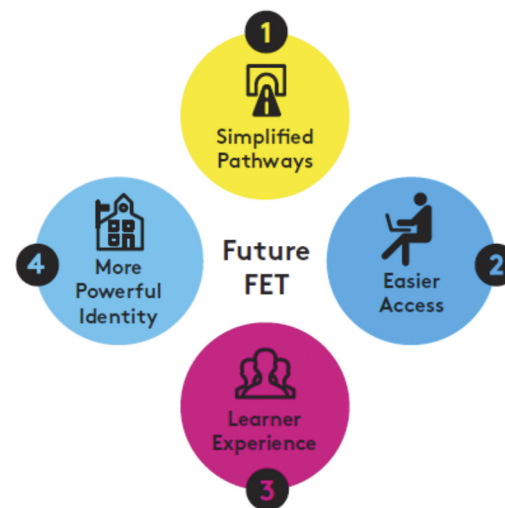
“ I believe the crisis created a moment of opportunity for Further Education & Training (FET) ”

Yet I believe the crisis also created a moment of opportunity for FET. As was noted in *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019–2020*, at the beginning of 2020 we were on the cusp of launching a new five-year strategy for the system, following extensive consultation. This prospective strategy was centred on ensuring a more agile approach by FET to meet the rapidly evolving requirements of work, enterprise, society, and our communities.

Never was this need more apparent than at the onset of a pandemic which was severely constraining levels of social and economic activity and traditional means to deliver learning. It was imperative that FET respond to the impact and legacy of Covid-19 to ensure that those left unemployed

were given the upskilling and re-skilling support to find a pathway back into sustainable work.

This was built into the short-term response by SOLAS, ETBs, and other FET providers, and was reflected in the draft strategy as an immediate priority. The rest of the strategy remained valid and highly relevant, with its emphasis on simplified pathways, easier access, consistent learner experience, and a stronger identity, and was hence ready for government endorsement and delivery.



This came on the formation of the new government and the exciting creation of a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The new dedicated focus on all of tertiary education, bringing together FET and HE, offers real potential for FET and apprenticeships to grow their profile and contribution in meeting Ireland's future skills needs. Minister Simon Harris, appointed to lead the new Department, was quick to assert its commitment to a dual focus of facilitating both economic progress and social cohesion.

With Minister Niall Collins also appointed as Minister of State with a specific remit to look at further education and skills issues, the establishment of DFHERIS represented a real endorsement of the triple-pronged approach that characterises FET: skills, pathways, and inclusion. Indeed, one of Minister Harris's first acts was to launch the new FET strategy, 'Transforming Learning', and to commit to supporting its roll-out over the next five years. The central ethos of the new strategy is that 'FET is for everyone, regardless of any previous level of formal education, available in every community, and can offer you a pathway to take you as far as you want to go'.

The new Programme for Government (PfG) reflected a lot of the priorities set out in the Future FET strategy, including the need for a Covid-19 upskilling response; further expansion of apprenticeship; a more integrated approach to literacy, numeracy, and the digital divide; pathways from school to FET; and a green skills agenda. The second half of the year has continued to require adapting to the evolving restrictions caused by the ongoing prevalence of the virus; nonetheless, there has been a real focus on kick-starting action against all of these commitments. Highlights include:

- **Skills to Compete:** Additional investment under the government's July stimulus package and the Budget for 2021 to establish Skills to Compete, an initiative delivered by ETBs to upskill and re-skill those left unemployed by Covid-19. Targeting the initial delivery of 4,000 full-time and 15,000 part-time places, with the potential to ramp up to 50,000 in line with demand, the initiative combines employability support, provision of digital skills required for every future career, and

courses targeting growth sectors and occupations, to provide a pathway back into sustainable work.

- *Reform and Expansion of Apprenticeships*: The process to further expand and reform the apprenticeship system is ongoing, with a new action plan to be published at the end of the year. This will herald a more cohesive and consistent approach across the traditional craft and the newer 2016-plus apprenticeship programmes, and will provide a platform to deliver on the PfG ambition to reach 10,000 annual registrations by 2024. It will also look at an enhanced system of incentivising employers to engage in the apprenticeship system. This builds on the launch of the Apprentice Employer Incentive Scheme, which was launched in August 2020 and provides funding directly to employers to recruit and retain apprentices.
- *A New Approach to Literacy, Numeracy, and the Digital Divide*: SOLAS has been asked to coordinate the development of a new integrated ten-year literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy strategy. While FET has always played a strong role in this area, investing around €30 million a year, the strategy is intended to underpin a more integrated cross-government, cross-society, and cross-economy approach. It will be published in the first quarter of 2021.
- *Developing Green Skills*: SOLAS is expanding a network of near-zero-energy building (NZEB) training centres across Ireland, with Waterford and Wexford ETB and Laois and Offaly ETB already offering a range of retrofitting courses to support the upskilling and re-skilling needs in delivering this national programme. FET will also develop green skills and environmental awareness across all FET provision, with plans to develop common modules to equip learners with the knowledge and tools to drive future change.
- *Pathways from School into FET and Apprenticeships*: The Future FET strategy and PfG shared an objective of developing links between FET and second-level schools to improve vocational options and pathways. SOLAS is working with ETBs and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to consider how such pathways could be developed, including Transition Year apprenticeship modules, level 5 and 6 modules that could be integrated in a redeveloped senior cycle, and links from schools into FET colleges.

All of these developments characterise the innovation and excellence that we see from ETBs and throughout the FET system every day. The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for transformation in how we learn. Add to that the looming threat of Brexit, and the importance of a strategic, agile, and responsive FET system is apparent like never before.

The way that ETBs and other FET providers, agencies, and bodies have responded to recent challenges underlines their commitment to shape and lead this next critical phase of development, and we would like to thank them for their continued excellent work. The future of FET is exciting. The future of FET is now, and we look forward to working with you all on this exciting journey.

The Social and Economic Impact of Further Education and Training

FET as a pathway that made a difference

Further education and training makes a substantial impact on the social and economic landscape for citizens across Ireland. This article highlights six key themes that demonstrate this, underscoring why FET will have an even bigger part to play in the future.

As we look out at the landscape in Ireland in autumn 2020 through the virtual windows of our laptops and phones, in this rapid changing of culture as we know it – in our homes, our work and social environments, and how we plan and go about our daily lives – the potential impact of further education and training (FET) has never been greater.

Ireland has a rich history of transforming lives and communities through education. Who could forget the many wonderful stories in the tapestry of the FET system that we have proudly applauded as we acknowledge the tangible successes of learners on their journeys?

Highlights for me include the stories told by the mother who was now able to help her young child with his homework, the grandfather who completed a lifelong dream to obtain his apprenticeship in a career he had worked in for decades, and the young teenager who found a true passion for art and creativity after leaving school early. I think of them often. All of us know of a person who found that FET was the pathway that made a difference.

There is a huge story to be told across the island of Ireland on the social benefits of FET. The economic impact, less visible, is an area not yet fully explored and one which may take prominence in the challenges ahead for the social and economic decisions that will need to be made. In SOLAS, an organisation with an annual budget of €800 million and over 200,000 learners registering every year, of course we need to be able to articulate clearly the social and economic benefits of FET. So what do we know?

Evidence clearly suggests there is an economic return on investment in FET.

In the last few years, SOLAS has been building on previous social and economic pilot studies focused on Education and Training Boards, including recent additional research being conducted.



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This material gives us an indication of the potential scale of the economic return, which will be outlined in additional communications before the end of 2020.

Independent evaluations have also been undertaken on FET programmes which, in many cases, link to positive findings on the broader outcomes of specific provision. National research published this year by the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS shows that those with FET level 6 qualifications had a higher share in employment than those with higher education level 6 or 7 awards.¹

FET is supporting learners to gain employment and strengthening the scope for graduates to obtain sustainable employment.

In recently published research by SOLAS,² done in partnership with the Central Statistics Office, on learner outcomes of Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision, 64% of 2014/15 graduates from labour market programmes secured substantial employment in 2016, with 27% progressing to a higher-level degree programme in higher education in the same field of learning. Of that cohort, 16% were in both higher education and substantial employment within 12 months of PLC completion.

From 2017 to 2019, overall employment outcomes from FET provision are estimated to have grown by almost 9 percentage points. A recent CSO report found that 62% of 2016 graduates with major awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation,³ and that 80% of the apprentices who qualified in 2014 were in substantial employment in the second year after qualification, up from 53% for those who qualified in 2010.

Many learners continue their FET journey once they start, with many progressing to higher education. This indicates strong satisfaction with the content and delivery of provision; it also highlights learners' ambition and motivation to upskill.

In 2017, 2,821 learners completed a level 4 FET course. Almost 1,100 of them then started another level 4 course, while 915 registered for a level 5 or 6 course. Some learners completed a level 4 course in their second instance: 102 out of 248 of the same learners did an additional level 4 course, while 45 began a level 5 course, and three began a level 6 course.

The high individual participation rate and the profiles of learners are further explored in the overall 2018 reports on the FET system⁴ and in linked materials⁵ which reference that more than 30% of learners in 2018 chose to participate in more than one type of FET provision.

Independent analysis on a specific set of programmes in FET indicates that 88% of learners said participating in FET increased their confidence and self-esteem.

SOLAS is committed to further analysis and research at a national scale on the tangible social benefits and impacts of learners participating in FET. As SOLAS implements and progresses the national *Further Education*

and Training Strategy: Transforming Learning 2020–2024,⁶ in partnership with stakeholders and the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, this will be a key area to further define and articulate. Recent measures and tools such as the SICAP distance travelled⁷ methodology and the ongoing digital transformation in data and evidence-based outcomes infrastructure, which is now in place, will be key enablers in progressing this agenda.

FET is contributing to the economic landscape in Ireland. It has a key role in supporting industry and employees at this critical time, when we also face the threats and opportunities of Brexit and the risks of automation.⁸

The FET system has significantly advanced the skills required by industry. The number of qualifications awarded in priority skills sectors increased by 16% from 2017 to 2018, evidencing that FET is responding effectively and refocusing provision in areas of greatest regional and national need. In 2018, more than 40% of women learning in FET and 38% of men on certified courses were completing learning in critical skills areas for Ireland.

“ The FET system has significantly advanced the skills required by industry.

Apprenticeship registrations have increased substantially since 2015, growing from 3,153 to 6,177 by the end of 2019. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on FET across 2020, certain types of provision have increased, such as in Skills to Advance initiatives, which are directly benefiting employers and employees.

The social impact of FET needs real recognition for learners who may benefit more substantially than others, due to their backgrounds or circumstances.

A recent study by SOLAS on *Women in Further Education and Training*, which is near completion, indicates that in 2018 there were over 20% more female than male enrolments in the system across all age groups. The highest proportion of female learners who reported being engaged in home duties before beginning their FET course were aged 35–44.⁹ In Ireland, the average age for first-time mothers is 31.3 years. This may indicate that FET is a platform to support the upskilling or return to the workforce of women with young families.

Around 50,000 learners choose to participate in community education annually, with increasing evidence of diversity in learners. The SOLAS FET system data reports for 2018 show the learner journeys for learners with a disability,¹⁰ learners from the Traveller community,¹¹ and learners from the Roma community.¹² With the pending government ten-year strategy on literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy, it is likely that the social as well as economic benefits this could deliver will be a key outcome for success.

We don't yet know fully what the long-term impact of Covid-19 will be, but it is already substantial, with the more marginalised and underrepresented members of our communities potentially at much greater risk of longer-term negative impacts. Recent research that we completed in our Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, for example, highlights that non-Irish nationals may require additional supports to integrate fully into the labour market to ensure that their skills are adequately matched to employers' skills needs.¹³ FET interventions may be part of the solution in achieving

“ There is a huge story to be told across the island of Ireland on the social benefits of FET.

this. The social impacts that FET can deliver should not be underestimated, given the current environment.

Significant qualitative outcomes are captured and reported by learners on the benefits of participation, including in the FET Learner Voice initiative, led by Aontas.¹⁴ This project has never been more important than in 2020, when the learner voice must be at the centre of our decision-making. Finally, we must not forget the many social and economic impacts associated with lifelong learning. Participation in lifelong learning continues to increase in Ireland, as shown in the recently published SLMRU report: from 13% in Q4 2018 to 14.7% in Q4 2019.¹⁵

In conclusion, we already know a lot about the social and economic impact of further education and training, but equally we must commit to further exploring and evidencing outcomes for learners. We are at the cusp of defining the 'normal' in the 'new normal', and one thing we know for sure is that FET has an even bigger part to play in the new Ireland.

ENDNOTES

1. SLMRU Summer Skills Bulletin 2020: Employment Profile of Persons With Post-Secondary Qualifications. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/00006d2300/summer_skills_bulletin_2020.pdf
2. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/c0e31abee7/plc-outcomes-report.pdf
3. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-feo/furthereducationoutcomes-graduationyears2010-2016/
4. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/6085857abc/this-is-fet-facts-and-figures-2018.pdf
5. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/2dc6fd81e7/solas_fet_facts-figures_infographic_web-002.pdf
6. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/64d0718c9e/solas_fet_strategy_web.pdf
7. www.gov.ie/en/publication/8dee88-my-journey-distance-traveled-tool/
8. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/c0564a358b/future-of-jobs-in-ireland.pdf
9. See SOLAS SLMRU research published in this area: www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/89fcd9ecc1/women-home-duties-report.pdf
10. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/ae0f704449/learners-with-disabilities-2018.pdf
11. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/0344a0eb46/fet-in-numbers-2018-traveller-community.pdf
12. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/6604ae43ea/fet-in-numbers-2018-roma-community.pdf
13. SOLAS SLMRU Profile of Non-Irish Nationals in Employment in Ireland, Q2 2019. www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/16a0481d20/15280_solas_spring_skills_bulletin_2020_web.pdf
14. www.aontas.com/knowledge/publications/?t=learner-voice
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“There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.”

– Jiddu Krishnamurti

Meeting Legislative and Governance Compliance during Covid-19

How Ballyfermot College of Further Education rose to the challenge



Cecilia Munro
Principal,
Ballyfermot
College of Further
Education

FET colleges were challenged by Covid-19 to meet all legislative, governance, and compliance requirements off-site. This involved a transformation of face-to-face FET provision to a fully remote model overnight. This article details how management and staff of Ballyfermot College of Further Education achieved a smooth transition in the crisis.

Introduction

As principal I lead and manage Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE), a constituent college of the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB). Like most other educational institutions at the various levels, BCFE rose to the task of completing the academic year from 12 March to 31 May 2020 in challenging conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

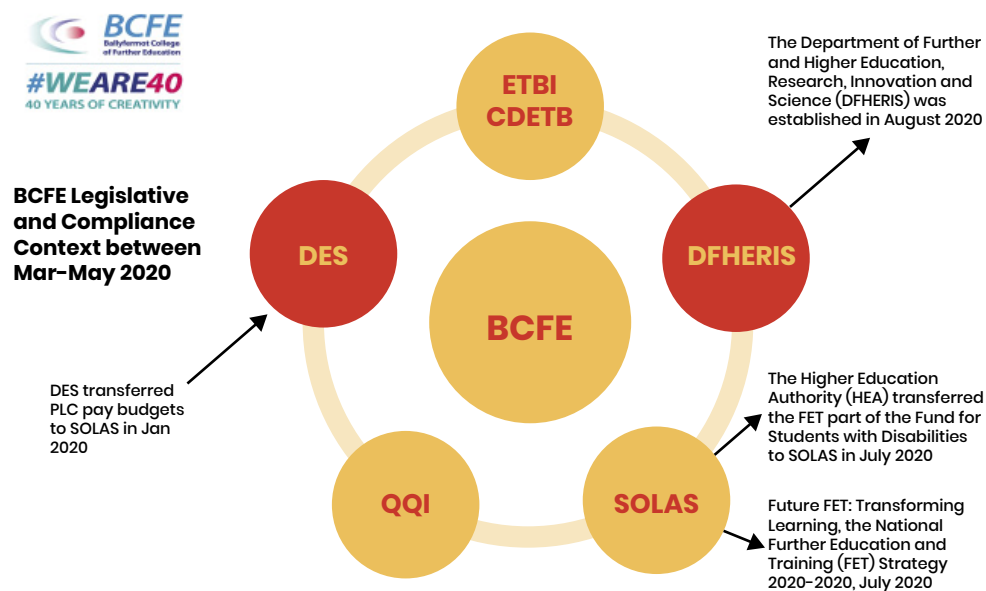
Legislative context

It is important to understand the legislative context in which BCFE is situated. Originally established in 1979 as the Senior College, Ballyfermot, it provided second-level education and pre-employment programmes to local students. In 1983 second-level delivery was phased out and replaced by Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. Over time, BCFE became one of the largest PLC providers in Ireland, earning a local, national, and international reputation for educating and training students for work and study in many different career sectors.

The global economic crisis in 2007 brought significant change and reform to the educational landscape in Ireland. Research by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs in 2007 focused on developing a National Skills Strategy that sought to 'identify the skills required for Ireland to become a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy by 2020' (EGFSN, 2007, p. 5). This led to legislative reform in Further Education and Training (FET), beginning in 2012 with the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a single agency for qualifications and quality assurance (QA), spanning levels 1 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

In 2013 the Education and Training Boards Act saw the amalgamation of thirty-three Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) and the training wing of FÁS (Foras Áiseanna Saothair) into sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The same year, SOLAS, a new national agency for coordinating policy and funding for the FET

sector, was established through the Further Education and Training Act 2013. All three pieces of legislation had a direct impact on the development, governance, and formation of the FET sector from 2013. In 2014, SOLAS launched the first national FET Strategy 2014–2019, which identified that ETBs, SOLAS, and QQI would work together to establish a world-class integrated system of FET in Ireland (SOLAS, 2014, p. 3) and to enhance quality provision in FET.



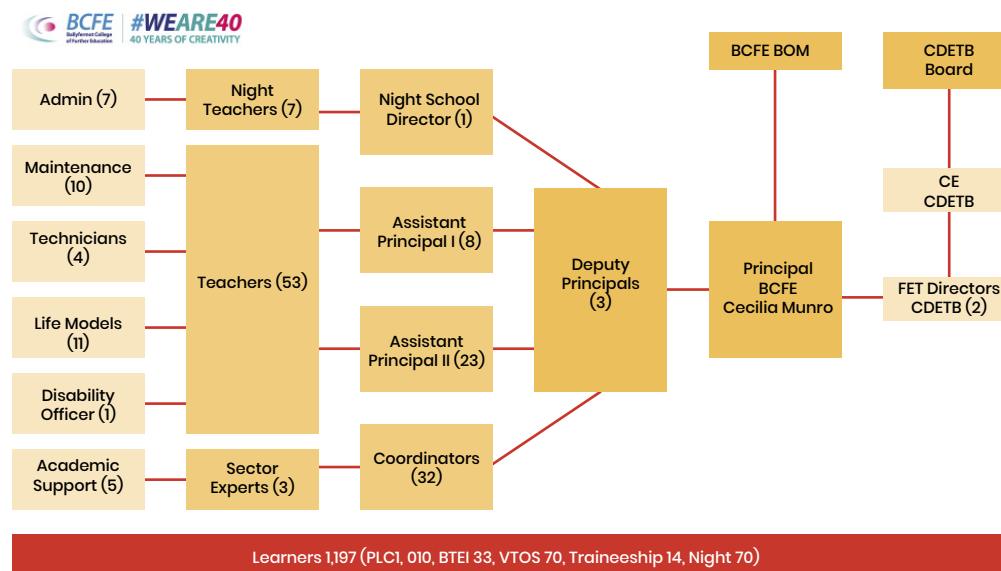
BCFE legislative and compliance context in March–May 2020

The diagram above sets out BCFE's legislative and compliance context in March–May 2020. It points to four significant developments in 2020 that show the fluidity of the sector:

- In January, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) transferred the pay budget for PLC colleges to SOLAS.
- In July, the Fund for Students with Disabilities transferred from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to SOLAS.
- In July, SOLAS launched Future FET: Transforming Learning, The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020–2024.
- In August, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was established.

Organisational context

BCFE's organisational chart, on the right, shows a typical public-sector hierarchical structure, comprising 128 staff, with reporting lines to the CDETB chief executive, whose performance is subject to oversight by the CDETB board. BCFE's BOM comprises three CDETB board members who provide oversight of BCFE's teaching and learning, and its operational and management activities.



BCFE organisational chart, March–May 2020

Governance context

Public bodies and many other organisations in receipt of public funding must ensure that their corporate governance frameworks conform to best-practice standards and comply with specified codes of corporate governance. DES supports the work of the ETBs in primary, post-primary, and FET provision through a yearly distributed fund of approximately €2bn from DES, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), and SOLAS.

It is therefore extremely important that the DES sets the tone and standard for the governance and assurances it requires from its different agencies, including ETBs. In tandem with DPER's governance developments, the ETB upgraded its 2015 Code of Practice for the Governance of ETBs in 2019.

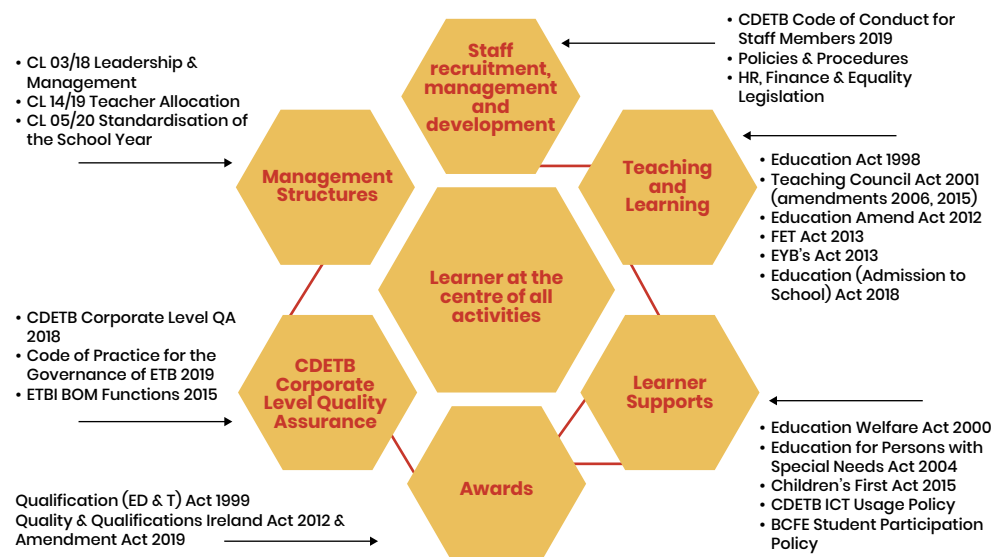
This Code of Practice should be primarily considered as a set of standards for members and staff of ETBs who are expected to ensure that their activities in relation to the ETB are governed at all times by these standards, in letter and in spirit. (DES, 2019a)

The Code concerns both the internal practices of ETBs and their external relations with the government, the Minister for Education and Skills, the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and their respective departments. The CDETB board delegates the responsibility of leading teaching and learning and managing BCFE to the principal, with oversight by BCFE's BOM. There are also three CDETB board members on the BOM. This delegation arose from the Education Act 1998 Section 15 (1), which outlines:

it shall be the duty of a board to manage the college on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of students and their parents and to provide

or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the college for which that board has responsibility.

In line with this Code, the BOM plays a key role in setting the ethical tone and culture of BCFE through its actions and the support of the principal. As principal, I effectively steward the organisation to be compliant in law and governance. The diagram below illustrates the complexities of my governance role and outlines some of the different governance tools involved in running a PLC college.



BCFE's complex legislative and governance environment

I use governance tools in the form of approved policies and procedures, where roles and responsibilities are clearly outlined. These are known as 'assurances' and if followed can show that public money being spent in the delivery of quality FET courses in BCFE is adhering to the highest standards of accountability and transparency. There is a specific, overriding focus on militating against the risks associated with QA, financial, strategic, operational, or reputational issues:

Quality assurance is anything that a provider does to maintain, improve and ensure the quality of the learner experience and its outcomes for the learner. Procedures are how one approaches their work. (CDETb, 2017, p. 3)

The Covid-19 challenge

A challenge arising from Covid-19 was to ensure that all legislative, governance, and compliance requirements were achieved in order to sign off on the academic year 2020, while working remotely. This was no easy task, as it involved a complete transformation of the face-to-face on-site FET provision to a fully remote model overnight, from 12 March to 13 March 2020.

There are many areas to comply with, as the diagram on the left shows, but the two most important for me in my role as principal during this period were, in my opinion, BOM and Data Protection/GDPR compliance. Quality Assurance is another key area, but it is covered in an article by Blake Hodgkinson, CDETb's FET director, elsewhere in this chapter.

BOM oversight

At all times the BOM, in particular the chair, was kept up to date on the oversight of BCFE and any issues arising. This included confirmation with the chair about the closure of the college on 12 March.

At the time of the initial closure there were still two BOM meetings outstanding on the yearly oversight schedule; these had to be held virtually (using email and Zoom) and a quorum achieved. This included dealing with college business, including approving the minutes of previous meetings; oversight on child protection reports; approving any policies and procedures; and most importantly reaching consensus on these issues. For example, the BOM had to approve BCFE policy on the admissions to the school year 2021/22 in May 2020 to be compliant with the Admissions to School Act 2018. This was then published on BCFE's website.

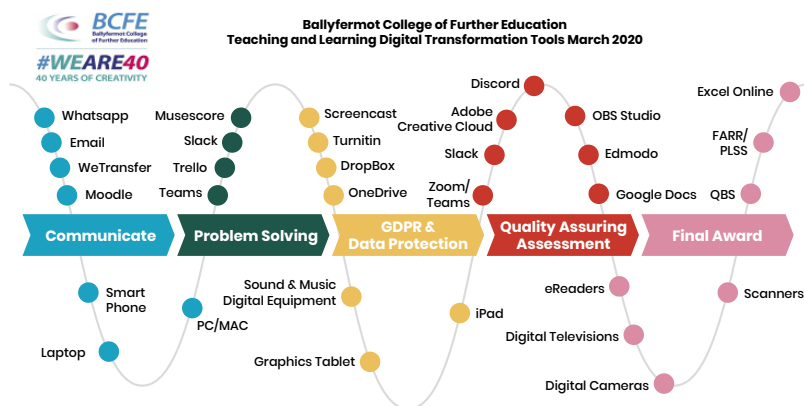
The BOM also had a key role in providing guidance and probing how risks were managed during this period. In particular, the principal and the senior management team (SMT) were accountable to the BOM for the oversight and implementation of the BCFE's Covid-19 Risk Register and for ensuring that all risks relating to Covid-19 during this period were militated against. At all times CDETb was kept up to date on risks as they emerged and changed.

Data protection and GDPR

Because all BCFE activities moved online overnight, it was extremely important that all data protection and GDPR were re-enforced with staff, in particular the security of students' data online and CDETb's Data Protection Policy (CDETb, 2018).

Before the college closed, staff had access to online systems such as MIT's eNROL (an admissions management system) and VSware (student data-management system). Both were account- and password-protected, cloud-based, and 3D-secure. This gave great confidence to the SMT in BCFE that students' personal and enrolment data was secure.

However, this had to be extended to the receipt and protection of students' online assessment, which was new. The pre-existing model called for the production of hard-copy assessment work so that external authenticators and examiners, across different national and international awarding bodies, could physically view students' work and assess the standard. The image below suggests the scale of the challenge as it outlines the different online platforms, software, hardware, and portable devices that BCFE teaching staff and students were using to ensure that assessments were received, marked, graded, and submitted to externs for final confirmation of standards and the final awarding of grades.



Teaching and learning digital transformation tools

Literally overnight, teaching and learning in BCFE digitally transformed. While BCFE uses Office 365 web-based applications for organisation and administration, and Moodle as its official virtual learning environment (VLE), as an SMT team we had to accept that different tools were being deployed to complete the final assessment.

Conclusion

Covid-19 brought a lot of challenges in March–May 2020. BCFE and its staff worked tirelessly to ensure that students received the teaching and learning they were entitled to and that they were given the correct recognition for the assessments they completed. While the legislative and governance compliance is complicated at FET level, it proves that by having the structures in place, following the guidelines, complying with the legislation, implementing policies and procedures, and providing assurances to all stakeholders, a smooth transition can be achieved in a crisis.

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This article makes the case that adopting universal design for learning in further education and training (FET) can help us reach every learner and reduce barriers to learning in the FET classroom. By offering flexibility, accessibility, voice, and choice in mainstream teaching and learning practice, we can reduce the need for individual add-on supports and provide a rich and engaging learning experience that benefits everyone.

I want to start by asking you to transport yourself out of our Covid-19-infused reality to a very different time and place. You're on a holiday with your friends in a beautiful Mediterranean city by the sea – let's say Barcelona. You've just checked in to your hotel and are out exploring the city. The sound of distant street music floats through the gentle bustle of Las Ramblas, and as the sun begins to set, the clinking of glasses across tables outside pretty cantinas marks the beginning of the evening's festivities.

Before dinner, you take a much-needed trip to the ATM. Your card is gleefully ingested by the machine, which then asks you a simple question. Obviously it's in Spanish, which you don't speak (for this story anyway). You can see that an empty box has appeared and correctly think, *No problem, it must be looking for my PIN.* Hurdle number one to a fun night out expertly navigated.

But now there's a second question, again in Spanish, this one less obvious. There are three answers to choose from, all in Spanish. You consider taking your chances on the most inviting option, but then panic sets in: *What if it's asking if I wish to cancel my card? Maybe it's offering me a loan? How am I going to bankroll the evening's tortillas and cervezas if this goes wrong?* You stand momentarily in an existential funk, before you see them in the corner of the screen: three little flags denoting German, English, and French. Relief flows through you as familiar words fill the screen and the joy of comprehension fills your brain. It turns out the ATM was only asking what kind of account you had, but no matter; you are now pulling crisp euro notes from the machine and are ready to skip on to whatever the night has in store.

If we look at what happened in your interaction with the ATM, you'll notice that the machine recognised that different people would require different ways to engage with and navigate its system; its designers built flexibility and choice into the interaction so you could engage with it on your terms. This recognition of the value of

Flexibility, Accessibility, Voice, and Choice

Universal design for learning can help us reach every FET learner



Dara Ryder
CEO, AHEAD

flexibility, accessibility, and choice, to give people options at the point of delivery, is ingrained in consumer culture worldwide, and I think we all, at some level, understand that value and desire it.

Go to any sandwich bar and you'll find at least five types of bread, with ten spreads and twenty toppings, placing hundreds of combinations at your fingertips. In online stores selling picture frames, calendars, and photobooks, you are offered countless options for customising your purchase to your taste. In major clothes stores you'll find trousers, skirts, and tops designed for the smallest to the largest of people in every conceivable colour, shape, and style.

These businesses are recognising the huge diversity of the people they serve, and accordingly are designing their offerings to the edges of their customer base, rather than to some mythical average person. And yet, with an education system, we still often demand that the people we serve – our learners – engage with programmes on our terms only. In many cases, practitioners want to be inclusive but don't know how, thinking, *If it worked for me, I guess it will work for them?*

When there is a need or a legal obligation to accommodate certain student groups when 'our way' doesn't work for them, for example for those with disabilities, we often make one change, one time, for one student, and then do it all again when the next student who needs accommodating comes through the door.

“ There is another way: one that locates barriers to learning not primarily in the individual but in the curriculum itself...”

But there is another way: one that locates barriers to learning not primarily in the individual but in the curriculum itself, and seeks to remove as many of those barriers as possible at the point of delivery. It is an approach where we offer all students choice in how they engage with, understand, and demonstrate learning, and that responds to the huge variability in our classrooms by building flexibility and accessibility into everyday teaching practice. It seeks to give learners real agency in their learning and to recognise that it's their class, not ours.

It's called universal design for learning, UDL for short, and it's based on a fundamental truth that is borne out by neuroscience research: 'Learning is as unique to individuals as their fingerprints or DNA' (Hall, Meyer, and Rose, 2012). UDL is a set of principles and guidelines for educators to design teaching and learning interactions that address the needs of the widely variable learners in our classrooms. Developed by Harvard-based organisation CAST in the 1990s, UDL is based on research in both neuroscience and the learning sciences.

Neuroscience shows us that three key networks of the brain need to be activated to learn effectively, and that different people need different approaches to activate them. Research in psychology and the learning sciences reinforced these findings (Rose, Meyer, and Gordon, 2014), and CAST developed the UDL guidelines in response through a dynamic, collaborative, and developmental process.

These guidelines have flexibility, accessibility, voice, and choice at their core, and call on educators to respond to diversity and variability by

following three core principles in the design of learning interactions (CAST, 2018):

- Provide multiple means of engagement – the ‘Why’ of learning (engaging the affective networks of the brain).
- Provide multiple means of representation – the ‘What’ of learning (engaging the recognition networks of the brain).
- Provide multiple means of action and expression – the ‘How’ of learning (engaging the strategic networks of the brain).

By applying these principles and the associated guidelines in their everyday teaching practice, educators can remove barriers to learning and provide enriching and engaging learning experiences that reach everyone. Additionally, when UDL is implemented, the need for retroactive add-on supports to address individual needs is reduced by building in flexibility and accessibility at the point of delivery.

Professional Development in UDL

SOLAS’s FET: Facts and Figures 2018 series of statistical reports showcase the huge diversity among Further Education and Training (FET) learners, highlighting the particular need for these practices in a sector where diversity and variability are part of the ethos. But to implement UDL successfully across the sector, we need all parties to recognise that inclusion is everyone’s business. It will require both the active engagement of practitioners with UDL on the ground and the strategic commitment and support of SOLAS, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and college/centre management.

FET practitioners have shown they are ready and willing by signing up in droves for the provision of CPD in the area of UDL.

SOLAS have signalled their intent in the new FET Strategy by making the provision of consistent learner support, underpinned by universal design, a strategic priority, and by committing to adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping its future provision (SOLAS, 2020).

On the ground, FET practitioners have shown they are ready and willing by signing up in their droves for the provision of CPD in this area. More than 600 signed up for AHEAD’s UDL for FET Summer School in July 2020, and similar numbers have registered for the AHEAD/UCD national roll-out of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning’s ten-week UDL Badge course this winter (AHEAD, 2020).

The resources required by AHEAD to deliver these initiatives are provided by the UDL for FET project, commissioned by SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The development of the key project output, a guide for practitioners on implementing UDL in FET, is nearing completion.

Guide for practitioners on implementing UDL

The key developers of the guide, Ann Heelan (AHEAD) and Dr Thomas Tobin (a UDL expert from the US), have tapped into the rich vein of inclusive practice that already exists in FET, and have translated the CAST guidelines into FET contexts by placing real Irish practitioner stories of engagement

with UDL at the heart of the guide. The development of the guide has been underpinned by a wealth of practitioner consultation and site visits, and by significant engagement from the UDL National Advisory Committee/Subcommittee, made up of important FET stakeholders and representatives from other key stakeholders such as the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.

With growing commitment from senior FET leaders and policymakers to supporting UDL, increasing practitioner engagement led from the ground up, and key practitioner guidance on implementation nearing completion, the stage is set for the large-scale adoption of UDL in FET. But there remains much to do to capitalise on this momentum, so I finish with a call to action and a request for you to reflect: How can you play your part as an actor on this stage?

National policymakers: How can you further support the adoption of UDL through state policy and resourcing? Senior ETB and college/centre leaders: How can you facilitate the time, networking, and professional development opportunities needed by practitioners to apply UDL on the ground?

Practitioners: How can you begin to use UDL to reflect on your practice and design learning interactions that offer learners voice, choice, flexibility, and accessibility?

If we can each answer those questions and act, we are well on the road to a UDL-infused FET system where inclusion is everyone’s business.

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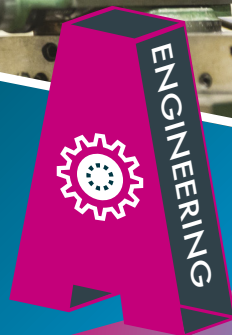
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Universities are Ireland's Engines of Innovation

How Trinity became the most innovative university in Europe

Research from the US venture-capital company Pitchbook has named Trinity College Dublin as Europe's most entrepreneurial university for the past six years. This did not happen by chance: the college has been busy on many fronts to encourage students from all disciplines with an entrepreneurial bent.

Last year, Dr Diarmuid O'Brien, chief innovation and enterprise officer at Trinity College Dublin, said, 'Trinity has placed innovation and entrepreneurship at the heart of its strategy.' Dr O'Brien was speaking in response to the news that Trinity had been ranked first in Europe for producing venture-backed entrepreneurs from its undergraduate programmes for the fifth year in a row. This commitment to innovation and entrepreneurship continues at Trinity, and aims to encourage students from across faculties to become change makers, business starters, and conscientious global citizens.

Innovation and entrepreneurship: core motivations

Innovation and entrepreneurship have been core motivations at the heart of Trinity since its inception in 1592. Before we had the language to describe this aspirational and game-changing approach to education and research, Trinity embodied its principles. In 1842, Trinity founded the first engineering school in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Three Trinity graduates – Samuel Beckett, Ernest Walton, and William Campbell – have been awarded Nobel Prizes.

This innovation-driven evolution has remained central to the college's progress. Trinity is now a leading university of research practices and the only Irish university to be a member of the League of European Research Universities. It has been recognised for its research excellence in nanotechnology, immunology, mathematics, humanities, engineering, and other fields. Research centres at Trinity include the ADAPT Centre, Connect, CRANN, Amber Centre, Trinity Centre for Digital Humanities, and CONSULT Trinity, launched in 2019.



Ken Finnegan
CEO at Tangent,
the ideas
workspace based
at Trinity College
Dublin

Trinity has a clear commitment to providing a space for change makers to collaborate across disciplines, innovate together, and create for each other. This ecosystem grows in importance as we enter a knowledge-based world where innovation

is essential. As a society we face unprecedented global challenges which require agile thinkers, innovative researchers, and loud disrupters to help solve.

The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030 report by the OECD reminds us: 'We must prepare for jobs that have not yet been created, for technologies that have not yet been invented, to solve problems that have not yet been anticipated.' This report was published two years before the Covid-19 pandemic became a problem that many had not anticipated. New attitudes, skills, and behaviours are needed that stimulate the pursuit of creative tasks, address complex problems, support sustainable employment, and foster lifelong learning in innovative ways.

The pandemic has taught us many things, but most abruptly it has taught us that we must be adaptable and resilient. Trinity is committed to providing a home for students to learn this adaptability and to challenge themselves in what they can achieve, and it is committed to supporting them as they become change-makers and entrepreneurial leaders. Entrepreneurship includes the attitudes and skills to create new value in society, not just being a business owner or founder of a start-up. These behaviours give people the willingness and ability to recognise and pursue opportunities for new value creation and problem-solving in any organisational setting.

Tangent, the ideas workspace

Tangent, Trinity's ideas workspace, was established in 2018 as part of the university's commitment to delivering a transformative learning environment that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. Trinity understands that putting the right people in the right place at the right time cultivates ideas and allows great things to happen. Tangent is a state-of-the-art innovation hub that serves all university students, faculty, the enterprise community, government bodies, and not-for-profit organisations. It offers a space in which multiple disciplines, schools, and indeed the wider enterprise community can come together to learn, educate, and collaborate.

By facilitating the richness granted by interdisciplinary work, Trinity, through Tangent, aims to translate ideas into transformative social, economic, and cultural impact. Its regional and global programming aims to instil an innovative spirit and entrepreneurial hunger in students, participants, staff, and external collaborators alike, creating change makers of the future. It invites participants to embrace the opportunities presented by change, enabling them to exploit uncertainty and complexity with lateral thinking.

Trinity Access Programme (TAP)

Trinity's innovative spirit is not confined to the academic or commercial realms. The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) was set up in 1999 to offer another pathway into Trinity for young adults whose social, economic, and cultural experiences had prevented them from going to college. TAP now works in partnerships across the education sector with students, teachers,

“Tangent is a state-of-the-art innovation hub that serves all university students, faculty, the enterprise community, government bodies, and not-for-profit organisations.”

“The GCID provides opportunities for the Trinity community to further engage with the Irish and international entrepreneurial ecosystem.”

families, communities, and businesses to enhance access to third-level education for people historically excluded from the experience.

Tangent offers a suite of postgraduate courses, which are funded as part of the Springboard+ upskilling initiative in higher education. These courses are anchored in innovation and entrepreneurship but are tailored to sector needs and feature industry leaders as contributors. They offer students the opportunity to work on real-world problems and challenges, including questions around the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These are opportunities that make Trinity truly innovative. It not only recognises that innovative and entrepreneurial character is possible in anyone, no matter their current career path, study faculty, background, or age, but it also provides pathways through which individuals can explore their potential.

Grand Canal Innovation District (GCID)

Trinity is a home and playground of entrepreneurial and innovative character, and our home is growing. In 2018, the Grand Canal Innovation District (GCID) was announced. The advisory group at the Department of the Taoiseach, in its associated report, noted: 'Progressing an innovation district in the Docklands area is an opportunity to shape development there in a way that maximises the benefits for the local area, the city, the region and country.'

This is the next step in building a home for entrepreneurial and innovative students to care for their imaginations, excite their potential, and create cultural, political, social, and economic impact. The GCID provides opportunities for the Trinity community to further engage with the Irish and international entrepreneurial ecosystem, and provides opportunities to its students to engage with that ecosystem.

Trinity challenges its students. Our programmes at Tangent invite students to challenge their thinking, apply their course learnings in a cross-disciplinary manner, and become change makers of the future. Our postgraduate offerings are accessible, our Undergraduate Certificate in Innovation and Entrepreneurship is a European leader, and our dedicated entrepreneurship programmes have supported over 1,500 students to create significant cultural, social, and economic impact. By maintaining a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, Trinity continues to nurture its talent from across disciplines.

“If you can dream it, you can do it.”

– Walt Disney

Covid-19 presented unprecedented challenges to all aspects of FET provision in City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB). After careful consideration, a number of procedures had to undergo almost immediate alteration. In 2018/19, CDETB adopted new corporate Quality Assurance (QA) structures. This article outlines how the new structures and systems responded to the pandemic.

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD announced that all face-to-face education would pause until 29 March. This presented challenges to all education providers no matter what their level or scale. Further Education and Training (FET) provision by City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) is very diverse in terms of student/learner cohorts, programmes and courses delivered, and settings and locations. On the day of the lockdown, the 22,000 FET students/learners in CDETB varied in age from 16 to 91 years. They were studying in seventeen Colleges of Further Education, two training centres, ten Youthreach centres, ten Community Training Centres (CTCs), five adult education areas, and seven centres providing education to prisoners and ex-prisoners. Some others were involved in specialist training programmes and Department of Justice workshops in locations across the city.

We had begun to discuss the possibility of a lockdown and what its impacts might be, but few of us believed it was imminent. The complexity and challenges that we faced cannot be minimised. For example, in the three weeks after lockdown began, around 700 CDETB students/learners were due to undertake Erasmus+ work placements across Europe. This is normally an amazing vocational aspect of some of the courses we provide, involving intensive work-based learning in a partner country. This one small item, which would not have crossed many minds, required many hours to resolve and involved seeking refunds for airplane tickets and cancelling accommodation bookings. Though difficult, it was easier than some other challenges we faced during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Overview

At the outset of the lockdown, each of our forty-plus centres prepared a contingency plan to cover all aspects of delivery. Key aspects of the plans included:

An Education and Training Board's FET Quality Assurance response to Covid-19

Stress-testing a new ETB governance structure



Blake Hodkinson
Director of Further Education and Training, City of Dublin ETB

- sourcing ICT devices for staff, students, and learners
- further developing and refining emergency remote teaching and learning
- converting examinations to assessments
- ensuring that all learning outcomes were covered
- facilitating online submission of assignments
- undertaking internal verification and external authentication in a completely changed environment
- communicating with and supporting students/learners while working remotely
- ensuring the quality of the education and training processes while maintaining the integrity of certification and awards.

FET managers had to ensure that the education or training their college or centre was providing was not compromised by Covid-19. They had to achieve this while leading and supporting their staff through the unprecedented and very challenging period of lockdown. College of Further Education principals, centre managers, and staff were rapidly inducted into the world of Zoom, Teams, and GoToMeeting.

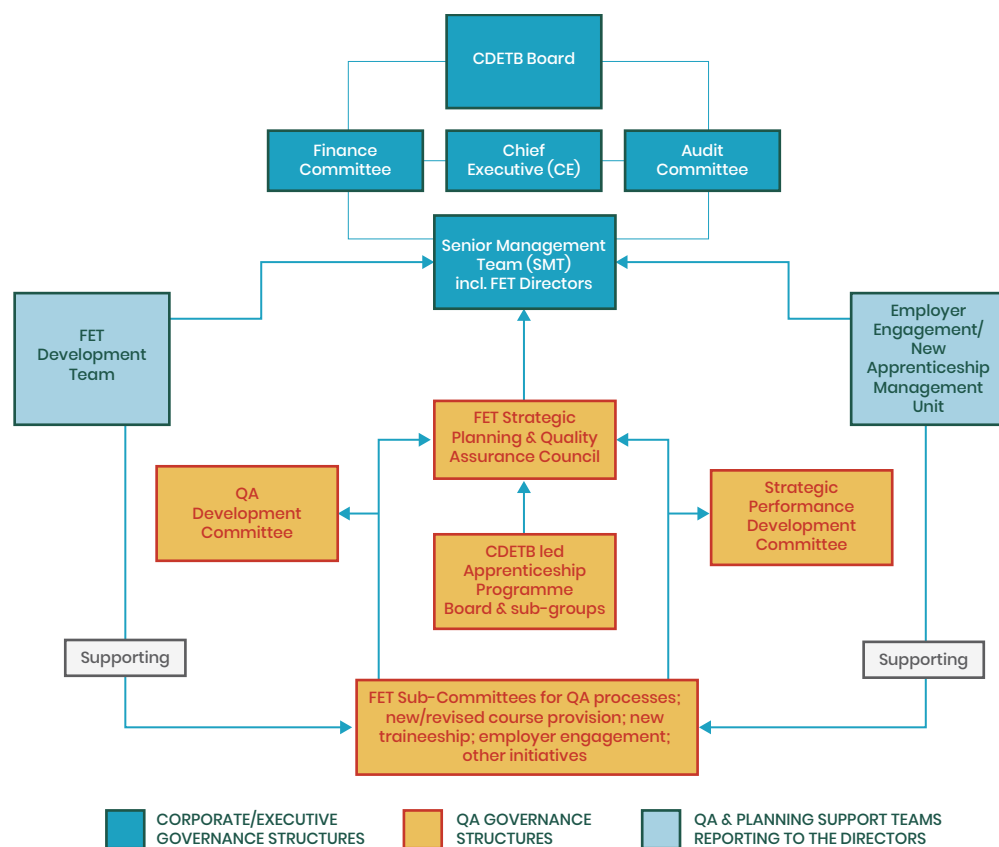
Plans, questions, and solutions were presented to the CDETB Quality Assurance and Strategic Planning Council (QASPC), the main QA oversight group in CDETB. Ideas were discussed, debated, questioned, and further developed or ceased. The following principles guided our response to Covid-19 and emerged from discussions across CDETB:

- safety of learners and staff
- minimise impact on learners
- maintain the integrity of all awards
- maximise learning opportunities
- collaborate with other providers
- establish emergency plans
- recognise the disruption brought about by Covid-19 and put in place strategies to address not only the academic but the social and emotional impact of the virus on our staff and current and new learners
- ensure that IT, assessment, and other learning is not lost. (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020)

All of our QA actions had to conform to our guiding principles. Each ETB nationally has a slightly different QA governance structure. CDETB's is based on the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) template. The two biggest modifications in the CDETB QA governance structure are that:

1. Strategic performance is included, allowing for planning and implementation of agreements with SOLAS to be overseen centrally.
2. Quality teams are established in all FET centres and report to the QA development committee. These teams have been a key component at a local college/centre level in our response to the pandemic.

Quality teams have been invaluable during the crisis, their role being 'to promote, enhance, develop, coordinate and support quality assurance in a college, centre or service sphere and to foster and embed a culture of quality improvement in the provision and delivery' (Farrelly, 2019). The teams of local staff at the coalface provided many solutions to the



CDETB QA corporate governance structure (CDETB, 2018)

different difficulties we had to overcome. The QASPC would ask specific teams to consider different scenarios and then return with potential solutions. Normally the question would be asked of two or three teams to generate different opinions and options. The QASPC would consider these and develop them. Ideas and solutions were discussed with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), who would offer insights on their suitability.

Simultaneously we engaged with our colleagues at different levels in the other fifteen ETBs, through ETBI structures, and this allowed ideas and thoughts to be shared. The sectoral collegiality and responses proved invaluable. CDETB had devised a blended learning policy some years ago, which fed into the ETBI blended policy and made it easier to move to emergency online tuition across the sector. Ideas were discussed with QQI at ETBI and ETB level, and they helped moderate the diverse solutions that were generated.

Responses

It is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of responses during the Covid-19 lockdown, due to the extensive number of interventions. I therefore encourage readers to read 'Informing the Future: Review of CDETB's COVID-19 responses and their impact on QA, Teaching, Learning

and Assessment', which gives detailed examples and insights into the responses from across the range and breadth of CDETB provision.

The human aspect of the pandemic is really brought home in the review, with staff supporting younger FET learners through bereavement while maintaining their engagement and focus on education and training. From the period of the lockdown, the following QA responses stand out in my mind:

- Extensive professional development was delivered to support the emergency overnight change to online delivery. A repository of online resources was established, along with a communal staff Moodle site managed by the Curriculum Development Unit. Community providers funded by CDETB and other secondary providers were invited and encouraged to avail of the free training.
- Guidance documents covering various scenarios were created to guide staff at college and centre level.
- All examinations were converted to assignments and internally verified to ensure they still met the requirements of the course.
- Alternative modules were delivered in cases where work experience was required. FET staff mapped learning outcomes against work experience and sought out the best fit. Permission was then sought from QQI to alter the components in an award. This required assessments to be designed and internally verified before they could be delivered remotely.
- Weekly online meetings for all FET managers were established, which morphed into a community of practice (COP) with agreed terms of reference. These meetings proved invaluable for everyone, as all issues and challenges could be aired and teased out. Without the COP, Covid-19 could have been a far more damaging experience for CDETB and a lonelier place for all staff in positions of management.
- The frequency of all QA meetings increased to weekly, which ensured that all centres were implementing agreed changes uniformly. CDETB staff engaged at sectoral meetings and Covid-19 meetings led by the Department of Education and Skills.
- Local quality teams generated most of the solutions to the challenges that the scheme faced.

Reflections

CDETB learned an enormous amount from the experience of the Covid-19 lockdown. As an organisation in the business of learning, this is very appropriate. Our new QA governance structures proved robust, yet it is the local quality teams that made the real difference. I encourage all providers to establish local QA teams and make them part of their formal structures if they have not already done so.

Overcoming the many challenges during lockdown required all parties in CDETB to see the issues and to work towards practical solutions. Of paramount concern was to ensure that students/learners received their qualification without compromising on quality or the health and well-being of staff, students, or learners. CDETB staff and managers, Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), SIPTU, other ETBs, QQI, and ETBI all found themselves

facing a common enemy, Covid-19, and pulled together for the well-being and future of students and learners.

Rory O'Sullivan, principal of Killester College of Further Education, said to me, 'Never let a good crisis go to waste.' I have taken this sentiment to heart. As I've mentioned, we undertook a formal review, 'Informing the Future', in June. We captured our learning thus far from the pandemic and have used this to inform our actions for the summer and autumn of 2020.

Staff attendance at various training and upskilling events in ICT and QA has exceeded 5,000, while €880,000 has been spent on devices for FET learners to reduce digital disadvantage. Requirements for staff to move from emergency remote teaching to deliberate remote teaching has been priced, and funding has been sought from SOLAS. As a scheme, our QA is stronger now than ever before. Everyone has a far deeper understanding of all that is required and the role they have to play.

Finally, CDETB's positive management of the lockdown and the QA challenges that arose was underpinned and informed by our FET development team, the CDETB QA ninjas who helped us make sense of the chaos and put order on the madness.

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“ I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts.”

— Abraham Lincoln,
16th president of the United States

Adult and Community Education as a Pathway to Further Study

Lifelong learning in support of social inclusion and access to work-based learning



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This article highlights the importance of adult and community education as a pathway to further study and work. It looks at how this form of education provides flexible, lifelong learning opportunities that support social inclusion and access to work-based learning for citizens, and how this learning option has been affected by the pandemic.

Ireland has a strong and vibrant adult and community education sector, which is a significant strand of the national network of Education and Training Boards' (ETB) Further Education and Training (FET) provision. This strand of education represents an emancipatory process aligned to human, community, and societal development. Adult and community education provides lifelong learning opportunities that support social inclusion and access to work-based learning for citizens aged sixteen and over. SOLAS (2019) endorses the role of FET's vocation programmes in:

- strengthening employment prospects through their focus on regional and national critical skills needs
- progression opportunities to other education and training
- the development of transversal skills
- social engagement.

This is reflective of the Community Education Facilitators' Association report (2014), which concluded that FET's adult and community education opportunities 'pave the way for progression to a job or further education and training' (p. 23).

Profile of participation

An adult's life experiences and roles provide the platform for their learning trajectory, which is often focused on acquiring knowledge to support progression (Maloney, 2020). The decision to engage in adult and community education is highly individualised (Waller, 2006). Seminal work by Cyril Houle (1961) proposed three categories of adult and community learners: the goal-oriented learner, motivated by personal interest and with clear and defined goals to be accomplished; the activity-oriented learner, motivated by the opportunity of social engagement with other adults; and the learning-oriented learner, motivated by the enhanced opportunities and self-improvement that education offers.

The adult and community education pathway offers opportunities that can be accommodated with family, work, and other responsibilities. This pathway suits people who need a more flexible way to meet their education and training needs. Courses are delivered all year round and are developed using a learner-centred approach involving personal supports and tuition, leading to positive personal, social, and economic outcomes. Much of the ETB adult and community provision is offered in partnership with local agencies and community groups on a flexible, part-time basis to people inside and outside of the labour force. Importantly, adult and community education offers participants the option of pursuing either accredited learning opportunities at levels 1–8 on the National Qualification Framework (NFQ) or informal and non-formal courses, which are not accredited.

Accredited and non-accredited courses available

ETB FET colleges and centres that provide a range of both accredited and non-accredited adult and community education options are well established and familiar features in the learner's local community. The ESRI (2014) notes that the provision of unaccredited FET courses is particularly important 'when engaging with vulnerable groups, returning to education, and furthest from the labour market' (p. 88), as these courses build skills and knowledge and develop understanding and confidence for both the individual and the community.

The local nature of provision provides a sense of familiarity and flexibility for many learners who are juggling multiple responsibilities and enhances ownership of the learning process. This familiarity, in addition to feedback from previous learners and knowledge of the course location and tutors, makes the transition to adult learning less daunting. The important social capital that is generated through involvement in adult and community education provision in the learner's own community cannot be overstated. Schuller (2004) wrote that the benefits of increased social capital included 'better health, stronger social networks [and] enhanced family life' (p. 12).

“ FET's adult and community education opportunities pave the way for progression to a job or further education and training.

New horizons

Adult and community education provides an opportunity for those who deferred the decision to progress in education immediately after school as they entered employment or started a family, and who now want to pursue education and achieve a qualification (Watson et al., 2006). Life transitions such as bereavement, divorce, redundancy, unemployment, and children starting school have also been identified as triggers for commencing adult and community education. Santrock (2009) wrote that such events were 'not a catastrophe, but a turning point marked by both increased vulnerability and enhanced potential' (p. 23).

Adult learners have confirmed that their engagement in adult and community education opened up new horizons, was a reflective point from which they delineated positive changes, and led to the discovery or reclamation of aspects of themselves that had previously been neglected or submerged (West, 1996; Walters, 2000; Maloney, 2020).

Flexible pathway to progression

ETBs offer a wide portfolio of flexible adult and community learning opportunities, including classroom, work-based, online, and blended learning. This is delivered by professional, skilled, and knowledgeable FET practitioners in an environment that recognises learners' competing responsibilities. Adult and community education programmes have inherent advantages for adult learners in that they are more affordable than higher education colleges and universities and more flexible in their offerings: programmes can be customised based on local-employer and other identified needs. The local nature of adult and community education, combined with work placement opportunities and linkages with local employers, makes this a very attractive route of learning that offers a flexible progression pathway to work or education.

The adult and community education sector has long been acknowledged as an important learning pathway into and across FET, a supportive progression route into higher education, and a valuable enabler of upskilling and re-skilling for those in the workplace. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 set a target that 10% of new entrants to higher education – about 2,000 – would hold a FET qualification as the basis for their application. Currently FET graduates at level 5 and 6 account for about a quarter of the annual intake to the technological higher education sector (SOLAS, 2019). From 2001 to 2018 the number of applications to higher education that used a FET qualification for entry increased from under 3,000 to over 14,000 (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). Continuing study or advancement beyond adult or community education may not be an ambition for some participants when they begin, but the positive experience gained through engagement often makes them reconsider these possibilities (Maloney, 2020).

“ Adult and community education programmes are more affordable than higher education colleges and universities and more flexible in their offerings.

The strategic direction of the FET sector is to increase the numbers of employers and employees who access FET as a resource for upskilling. As the world of work is constantly evolving, developing, responding, and adapting to technological innovations and economic globalisation, the importance of adult and community education pathways to progression, upskilling, and re-skilling are more important than ever. According to the OECD (2016), around a quarter of workers in advanced economies reported a discrepancy between their skills and those required for their job. As our economy flexes, adult and community education pathways will play a pivotal role in enabling learners to access flexible education and training interventions as and when the need arises in their lives.

This is particularly important as the adult and community education demographic will be shaped by an increasing and ageing population and raised retirement age. As people live and work for longer, the need to engage in upskilling throughout their lives will increase. The adult learner is therefore more likely to move horizontally as well as vertically between courses and NFQ levels as they choose offerings across the tertiary continuum that meets their needs to develop work and life skills (Anderson et al., 2004).

Future considerations

ETBs are aware of the heterogeneous aspirations of adult and community learners and the need for provision to be flexible, accessible, and affordable. A commitment to improving the access, transfer, and progression of learners across and from adult and community education is central to sectoral strategy and policy.

In the era after the economic crash, the labour market and policy environment were conducive for adults to pursue qualifications. This situation is evident again during the current coronavirus pandemic. Covid-19 has also reinforced the need to strengthen communities and make them more resilient, and adult and community education is central in this regard. In particular, the pandemic has copper-fastened the role of digital learning for the foreseeable future and has thrown into sharp relief the requirement for adult and community learners to have access to a good home internet connection.

Access to electronic devices is necessary in supporting participation and militating against any potential educational disadvantage. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), with SOLAS, provided €5m in funding for ICT devices for FET learners. Through an ICT device loan scheme, ETBs have made every effort to ensure that ETB adult and community education learners who require access to ICT devices can do so.

The societal challenges presented by Covid-19, digitalisation, and demographic change, among others, underscore the importance of the adult and community education pathway in achieving our national objectives of economic competitiveness, social inclusion, and active citizenship. The benefits reaped are not just for participants but also for their family, community, and society as a whole. I believe the adult and community education pathway will be a formidable force for connecting people and communities after months of isolation and will reinforce the value of supportive community networks while delivering a flexible, learner-centred solution that advances knowledge, skills, citizenship, and social capital.

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National Film School IADT is named by Variety as one of the top worldwide film schools of 2020



This is the first time that an Irish school has made it on this prestigious rollcall. The list includes the University of Southern California (USC), the Beijing Film Academy, the UK National Film and Television School and Moscow's VGIK (the oldest film school in the world).

Each year Variety selects the top ten global film schools and educators in their report "The Entertainment Education Impact Report: The Top Film Schools and Educators from around the Globe".

"We are thrilled to make Variety's list of top film schools," said David Smith, President, IADT.

"And, in particular, their acknowledgement that we are the only institute of its kind in Ireland offering an array of film and television disciplines, including production, animation and design"

A strategic objective of the new National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy is to develop a new level 5 and level 6 proposition. This article takes the current suite of level 5 and level 6 FET programmes as a starting point and discusses what this new proposition could look like and how it might be achieved. It concludes with a proposal for charting a way forward.

Introduction

One of the most persistent features of further education and training (FET) provision over the years has been its fragmented nature (NAPD, 2019). A multiplicity of course types, with narrowly defined rules and eligibility criteria, has resulted in a ‘confusing array’ (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40) of FET programmes, which in itself is a barrier to participation. All of these programmes began as responses to particular policy objectives since the 1970s. Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, for example, began life as Pre-Employment Courses in 1977, developed in response to rising youth unemployment.

When the Education and Training Boards (ETB) were established in 2013, the suites of FET programmes provided by the Vocational Education Committees (VEC) and the National Training Authority, FÁS, were amalgamated, thus increasing the number and range of FET programmes. Currently, there are over thirty such programmes funded by SOLAS.

Given that FET professionals would be hard pressed to have a clear understanding of this range of programmes, where does a prospective learner even begin? Furthermore, there is considerable waste in the administrative overhead of managing a collection of siloed funding streams for each of these programmes. Rationalising the range of FET programmes, and their associated funding streams, is long overdue, and the new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) is the ideal platform to provide the appropriate strategic context.

The new National FET Strategy

The new National FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies, as a strategic objective, the development of a new level 5 and level 6 proposition:

The confusing array of vocationally focused programmes in FET, with apprenticeships, traineeships, evening training, specific skills training and PLCs offered in two very distinct

A New Level 5 and Level 6 Proposition

What might it look like, and how might we achieve it?



Rory O’Sullivan
Chair of Further Education and Training Colleges Ireland

settings (training centres and FE colleges), must be replaced by a new Level 5 and Level 6 proposition. This will have a core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes. (p. 40)

This article will focus on what this new proposition might look like and how its development might be realised. In particular, it will take the current suite of FET programmes as the starting point and propose a direction for rationalisation that could chart a way towards achieving this strategic objective.

Rationalising level 5 and 6 provision

The need to consolidate FET programmes is nothing new. In 1985, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) observed that the variety of vocational programmes ‘tended to be piecemeal in nature [consisting] ... of individual and largely unrelated programmes’ (p. 35). NESC concluded that ‘all post-compulsory vocational education ... should form consistent parts of an overall coherent framework. ... Ultimately, the first apprenticeship year could be regarded as one component of ... the Vocational Preparation Programme’ (p. 114) (known as the PLC programme today). Indeed, some consolidation occurred in the early 1990s, when a range of post-compulsory initiatives in post-primary schools was consolidated under the PLC programme.

“The need to consolidate FET programmes is nothing new.”

SOLAS funds over thirty FET programmes, including PLCs, apprenticeships, and traineeships (SOLAS, 2019). In addressing the challenge of today’s confusing FET landscape, one approach could be to categorise programmes by type and purpose. On that basis, four categories can be readily identified:

- Initial FET: for people starting or restarting a career, e.g., PLC, Apprenticeship, Traineeship, Specific Skills Training
- Continuing FET: for people in employment, e.g., Skills to Advance, Skills to Compete
- Activation FET: for people recently unemployed and close to the labour market, e.g., Springboard, Momentum
- Developmental FET: for people who are a distance from the labour market, and perhaps long-term unemployed, e.g., VTOS, adult education.

Considering FET across these four categories of course types highlights the various modes of provision and the diversity of learners. This article will focus on the Initial FET (IFET) category of level 5 and level 6 programmes in place. These include:

- PLC course
- Apprenticeship – both pre- and post-2016
- Traineeship
- Specific Skills Training
- Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS).

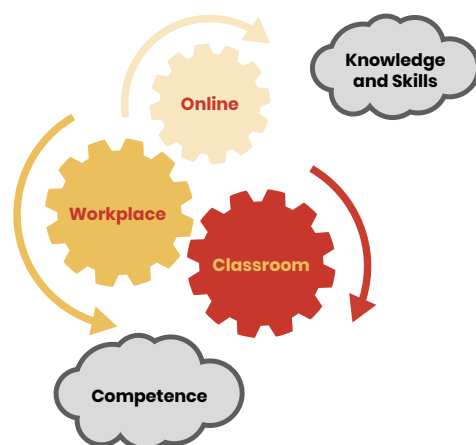
While these programmes were developed in response to differing policy objectives over time, in recent years, because of systemic convergences (O'Sullivan, 2018), they have in effect evolved to address similar goals. In other words, there are increasingly few differences between them. For example, a significant proportion of IFET programmes, delivered in either Colleges of Further Education or Training Centres, lead to the same form of certification provided by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

The increasing importance of employer engagement as a policy imperative, and responsiveness to the ever-changing nature of the labour market, raise further challenges of course content and modes of provision. A more flexible approach to all skill-formation provision, in both further and higher education, will be required. In these changing circumstances, requiring attendance in a classroom for a course as the only form of provision is no longer sustainable. The increasing acceptance of the value of work-based learning, with its implications for assessment, also needs to be part of the vision for the future. This would ensure that learning is placed in its occupational context – what Mulder (2015) refers to as the 'situated professionalism' approach to competence development.

In short, education and training provision will occur in three principal venues: classroom, workplace, and online (see image). The blend of these three will depend on various factors. Their accommodation in assessment will be an increasing part of education and training provision. Indeed, it is the level of integration of the learning across these three learning venues, within a situated-professionalism approach to competence development, that will be the key to the quality of all FET programmes (O'Sullivan, 2019).

Reflecting the new reality, courses can take place in the classroom, online, or in the workplace, with a blend of the three venues depending on the learning circumstances.

The new National FET Strategy also sets a strategic objective for this new proposition of at least 30% being work-based (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). This will have implications for provision, in terms of modes of delivery, staffing, and ongoing continuous professional development for FET staff. On the assessment side, there will associated governance implications, particularly for consistency of assessment. There may also be an implication for the number of credits given to the work-based element of the learning. In the current level 5 and level 6 awards, the certification requirement under QQI's Common Awards System, used widely on PLC courses, provides only



Three venues of learning competence model of skill formation (O'Sullivan, 2019)

“ The increasing acceptance of the value of work-based learning needs to be part of the vision for the future.

“ If we ignore the labels attached to the programmes, and view them as IFET programmes leading to level 5 or 6 awards, their similarities come into focus.

15 of the 120 credits, 12.5%, for work experience placement. This appears to be out of line with the strategic objective of 'at least 30% work-based' and may need further consideration.

From a range of FET programmes to a new proposition

While opportunities for consolidation across the range of IFET courses may include some elements of the apprenticeships, as suggested by the NESC in 1985, the remainder of this article will focus on full-time courses. The inclusion of apprenticeships in the new proposition will be left for a future discussion.

FET programmes are essentially a set of rules that govern approval, funding, and staffing aimed at addressing a particular policy objective. Over the years these rules have been shown to be too narrow in their focus and unresponsive to the changing policy landscape. In recent years, through the Strategic Performance Agreement process between SOLAS and the ETBs, full-time IFET programmes are categorised as primarily 'labour market focussed' or 'progression focussed'.

In the context of the vision for the FET College of the Future (SOLAS, 2020), which involves consolidating existing FET provision within a single integrated college structure, there may be an opportunity to examine the suite of current level 5 and 6 programmes through the dichotomy of 'progression focussed' versus 'labour market focussed' programmes. Regardless of this dichotomy, it needs to be borne in mind that 'labour market focussed' courses, leading to level 5 and 6 QQI awards, can also facilitate progression through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

As mentioned above, the suite of such programmes includes PLC (with the new pre-apprenticeships), VTOS, Traineeships, and Specific Skills Training. Clearly there are individual differences in the structure of these programmes, in particular, duration and degree of work-based learning. However, if we ignore the labels attached to the programmes and view them as IFET programmes leading to level 5 or 6 awards, their similarities come into focus. In addition, the three venues of learning can be clearly identified.

The reviews commissioned by SOLAS in recent years into a number of these programmes identified strengths and weakness in all (McGuinness et al., 2018; SOLAS, 2018). In examining these reviews together, complementarities begin to emerge, with the strengths in one programme type potentially complementing the weaknesses in another, and vice versa. For example, evaluation of the PLC programme identified the work experience element as a weakness, while one of the strengths of the traineeship was identified as employer engagement and the quality of structured training in the work placement element of the course. From an evaluative perspective, these various programmes could be seen as having 'piloted' different approaches to various aspects of similar policy issues. It is now time to collate the lessons learned and move forward with a unified offering.

While no perfect fit exists, perhaps a 'best fit' could be achieved through a hybrid or bricolage of the key strengths of these programmes into a new level 5 and level 6 proposition. The parameters in which this new programme would operate should be flexible enough to facilitate different situations. In other words, rather than having multiple narrowly defined programmes, leading to the same level 5 and 6 QQI awards, addressing different aspects of the same policy objective, why not create a single flexible programme, leading to a level 5 and level 6 award. This flexible proposition can then be adapted to meet the evolving needs of the Irish labour market, including sector-specific requirements. This would make redundant the need for multiple programme labels and multiple associated funding streams.

In higher education, many course types are distinguished by their level on the NFQ: level 7 degree, level 8 degree. There is no reason why FET cannot adopt a similar approach. This new proposition could be described by the level of qualification achieved at the end – a Level 5 Certificate or a Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate. From the broader perspective of an integrated tertiary education sector, there would be significant advantage in having the entire range of post-secondary course types, within disciplinary or occupational fields, distinguished by their NFQ level – from Level 5 Certificate, and Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate, to Level 7 and Level 8 Degrees, and beyond.

This approach would address the need, referred to in the FET Strategy, of providing clarity on the 'core brand, focused on the discipline/the career and NFQ level, and be linked to regional skills needs and clear employment or progression outcomes' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 40). Such an approach builds on the strengths of the current range of programmes and would also address strategic objectives under the three pillars of the new National FET Strategy – skills development, learning pathways, and inclusion.

This new proposition could be described by the level of qualification achieved at the end – a Level 5 Certificate or a Level 6 Advanced or Higher Certificate.

Developing a new proposition for level 5 and level 6 would facilitate employer engagement in skills development, as it would be clearer what is being offered. Similarly for students, the learning pathways would be clearer, removing the significant informational barrier that currently exists and, in so doing, enabling greater participation and inclusion. The development of this new proposition would have the added benefit of rationalising the administrative costs associated with current programmes, potentially freeing up funds to reinvest in its implementation.

Conclusion

This article discussed the strategic objective of a new proposition at level 5 and level 6, highlighting the urgent need to address the current 'confusing array' of FET programmes. It discussed what this new proposition might look like and how it might be achieved. It proposed the development of a new, single, unified offering at level 5 and 6, based on the collective strengths of the current suite of programmes.

This hybrid, or bricolage, of elements of existing courses would render redundant the need for multiple labels and their associated funding streams. Based on the three venues of learning, such a proposition would

provide sufficient flexibility to facilitate a range of requirements, including local or regional, sector-specific, as well as the evolving needs of the labour market as a whole.

However, a new approach needs to be taken to policy development than has been the case heretofore. As NESC (1985) observed about the range of vocational programmes at the time: 'Essentially they consist of individual and largely unrelated programmes grafted onto a system which has not undergone any basic change' (p. 35).

Rather than following the traditional approach to policy development and 'tweaking' the way we have done things in the past, we need to look to what is needed in the future, and design and resource the provision of this new proposition accordingly.

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Students who completed Erasmus+ Work Placements



Beauty therapy learners at Blackrock Further Education Institute, Co Dublin, with trainer Gillian Byrne. These students completed their Erasmus+ vocational work placements at the Tenerife carnival in 2019.

Further education and training in Kerry was delivered in disparate fashion until recent years, when it was decided to integrate provision into a single college across multiple campuses. This article describes the steps involved in planning and establishing an integrated FET college in Kerry, and outlines the benefits of the transformation.

Kerry Education and Training Board (ETB), established in July 2013, is the main statutory provider of education and training courses in County Kerry. On 1 January 2014, the training function was integrated into the newly established ETB as part of phase 1 of this national process. Further education and training (FET) courses were now being provided in the former VEC colleges and the former FÁS training centre. Similar courses were being offered in the two types of centre, but with different guidelines and course costs.

The need to rationalise was clear, and the timeline for moving from separate further education and training (FE&T) to integrated FET began.

From 2014 to 2018, during this transition, in many ways Kerry ETB presented a confused visual for learners across social and local media platforms. Kerry ETB centres and colleges were, in effect, competing with each other when marketing their full-time provision at levels 5 and 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). At this time, NFQ levels 5 and 6 and apprenticeships were delivered through the following model:

- Kerry ETB Training Centre: apprenticeships, traineeship, specific skill, community training
- Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) colleges: PLC courses at NFQ levels 5 and 6.

Transformation

Kerry ETB management had a moment of realisation in August 2018 when it became clear that the *transition phase* was at its end and a new phase was beginning. This *transformation phase* meant moving from the old model for FET organisation and delivery at NFQ levels 3, 4, 5, and 6 by separate ETB centres and colleges, to a model that enabled the ETB to meet the needs of learners across the county in a much more integrated way.

The drive to move to an integrated FET approach was underpinned by the following:

Kerry College: The Journey to an Integrated FET College



Colm Mc Evoy
Chief Executive
Officer, Kerry
Education and
Training Board



Owen O'Donnell
Director of Further
Education and
Training, Kerry
Education and
Training Board

- NFQ levels 5 and 6 full-time provision and apprenticeships were advertised under the Kerry ETB name but through an individual centre/college approach, which was confusing to audiences.
- The traditional approach drove competition in internal organisation in recruiting learners, which was not strategically healthy.
- The costs of promotion and recruitment were driven by a disparate approach (separate media adverts, brochures, etc.), with little economies of scale being achieved.
- There were quality-assurance concerns about the learning experience of learners and trainees in different locations pursuing the same QQI awards.
- There was a lack of integrated planning and sharing of resources by staff delivering similar courses in different ETB locations.
- Centres and colleges had different requirements for students/trainees to pay fees etc. for similar programmes.
- There was a disjointed approach to employer engagement, work experience programmes, etc., with centres/colleges managing these relationships individually.

“ In autumn 2018, the CEO and director of FET sat down with the manager of Kerry ETB Training Centre, and the two PLC college principals, to discuss the move from the traditional FE&T delivery to a new integrated FET model.

In autumn 2018 the CEO and director of FET sat down with the manager of Kerry ETB Training Centre and the two PLC college principals to discuss the move from the traditional FE&T delivery to a new integrated FET model.

A document was compiled to address the transition, describing the steps to complete it effectively in the local Kerry ETB context. It set out a five-year pathway that would strategically change the structure of full-time FET provision by Kerry ETB. The cornerstone for this strategy was the ETB establishing an integrated FET college in Co. Kerry that would encompass the provision of the training centre and the PLC colleges.

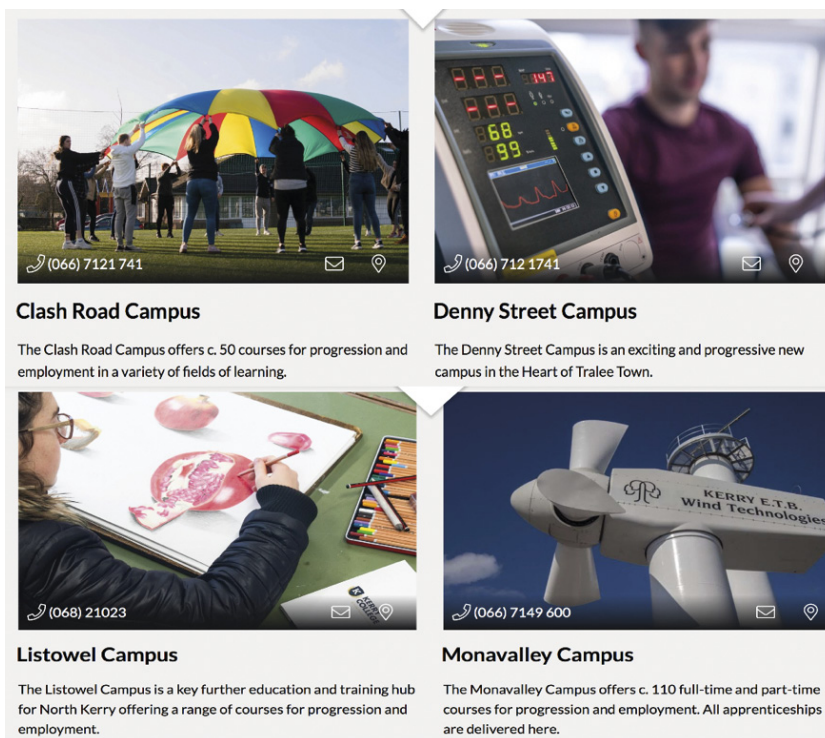
Management identified the following key areas to establish an integrated FET college:

1. full-time provision at NFQ levels 5 and 6 – a new course terminology that is easily recognisable and understood
2. promotion, branding, recruitment, etc. – a single identifiable brand
3. staffing – a fully integrated and united staff team
4. centralised planning – addressing course development and review, the development of centres of excellence, etc.
5. building and facilities – a schedule for refurbishment and renewal to an agreed standard for FET
6. learner/trainee income supports – the need to separate legacy income support from limiting (and in many cases determining) learners' course choices
7. employer engagement – a centralised approach was required
8. roll-out of a pilot integrated model for September 2019.

From late 2018 to June 2019, the management team worked diligently, engaging with stakeholders such as our funders SOLAS, the Department, staff, staff union representatives, learners, and the Kerry ETB Quality Assurance and Curriculum Development unit, in addressing each of these

areas with a view to launching a pilot integrated FET college offering for September 2019. A milestone was reached when SOLAS agreed for the ETB to progress with the pilot.

As with any initiative involving significant change, staff buy-in was essential, particularly as staff teams transitioned from the ETB training centre and two PLC colleges to the new integrated college. The FET Staff Day in April 2019 was key, with much of the agenda devoted to these developments, setting out the vision and strategic direction with input from SOLAS.



Clash Road Campus

The Clash Road Campus offers c. 50 courses for progression and employment in a variety of fields of learning.

Denny Street Campus

The Denny Street Campus is an exciting and progressive new campus in the Heart of Tralee Town.

Listowel Campus

The Listowel Campus is a key further education and training hub for North Kerry offering a range of courses for progression and employment.

Monavalley Campus

The Monavalley Campus offers c. 110 full-time and part-time courses for progression and employment. All apprenticeships are delivered here.

Management could then set about naming the new entity, and consulted extensively with all involved. The name chosen, and universally accepted, was Kerry College of Further Education and Training. It has since been abbreviated by many to Kerry College, which is proving to be excellent for brand recognition across the county. County Kerry is our campus.

Three courses were chosen for the pilot approach to course planning and integration: Office Administration, Beauty Therapy, and Hairdressing. They were chosen because they were traditionally delivered from the 'former' Kerry ETB training centre and the respective PLC colleges.

On 1 August 2019, Kerry College of Further Education and Training was introduced to the public through a well-planned promotional campaign. Kerry College campus locations in Tralee and Listowel became a reality on 1 September. Much had been achieved by this stage:

- new course description terminology: the NFQ levels 5 and 6 full-time provision were classified as apprenticeships, courses for employment, and courses for progression
- dedicated course promotion/recruitment function under the guidance of the director of FET
- staff communities of best practice were established across campuses
- centralised planning and review schedule for full-time NFQ levels 5 and 6 provision and apprenticeship
- review of existing facilities to ensure a standardised approach to meet course needs
- separation of learner course choice from legacy learner income supports, where possible
- a centralised approach to employer engagement and work experience placements.

A study visit in September 2019 to South West College, Omagh, with representatives from SOLAS was very informative for the next phase. It identified, much more deeply, areas that needed to be addressed in embedding the integration. Since then, Kerry College's journey has continued unabated, with many positive developments:

- better student/learner experience, with positive feedback received
- additional student/learner support services developed across campuses: medical, counselling, etc.
- standard course specification for the pilot programmers to ensure standardisation across campuses
- roll-out of 'Wellness in the Outdoors' module
- launch of new website: www.kerrycollege.ie
- publication of a single Kerry College prospectus
- opening of the dedicated Admissions Office and course recruitment function
- opening of the new Beauty and Complementary Therapies building
- unified SAP-based financial system introduced for all campuses
- centralised approach to procurement
- single governance board established per ETB Act 2013
- campus IT infrastructures and systems integrated, with recruitment of dedicated IT technicians
- roll-out of ID cards for all students/learners
- expansion of pilot course planning and integration, to include the following areas:

Course Area	Course Area	Course Area	Course Area
Childcare	Art, Craft & Design	Healthcare	Animal Care
Listowel Campus Lead	Clash Rd. Tralee Campus Lead	Monavalley Campus, Tralee Lead	Listowel Campus Lead
Employment	Progression	Employment	Employment

In September 2020 the number of campus locations expanded to five with the Kerry College National Outdoor Education and Training Campus.

It is planned to continue this transformation cycle for Kerry College with the inclusion of further FET centres in Kenmare, Waterville, Cahersiveen, Causeway, and Dingle (traditionally these provide level 3 and 4 courses,

with emphasis on progression pathways, outreach centre provision, etc.), the roll-out of school activation courses (transition year) for post-primary schools in Kerry, greater alignment with Youthreach, specialist training provision and literacy services, and expansion of evening and night-time provision.

2020/21 has been a challenging time for us all with the Covid-19 pandemic. Kerry College's highly integrated nature has helped to address the challenges, underpinning management's ability to respond to the ever-evolving situation in an agile, learner-centred way.

In 2019 Kerry College had more than 2,800 beneficiaries across courses for progression, courses for employment, and apprenticeships, and around 1,230 learners enrolled on evening programmes. Enrolments for 2020/21, despite the current challenges, are very good, and the college is well positioned to realise the vision for FET as set out in the SOLAS FET Strategy 2020–2024, 'Future FET: Transforming Learning':

FET will provide pathways for everyone. It will empower learners to participate fully in society and to become active citizens, and drive vibrant and diverse communities. FET will become the smart choice for school leavers, employees looking to up-skill and learners at all stages of their lives, with future FET colleges recognised as dynamic, modern and high-quality learning environments. FET will prepare people for work and successful careers, facilitate progress through tertiary education, and equip its graduates for a lifetime of continual learning and development. In five years FET will have grown its profile, with FET colleges serving as beacons of learning within communities which are widely recognised as a major driver of Ireland's next critical phase of economic and social development.

We look forward to continuing this transformational journey in making Kerry College a beacon of learning in the community across County Kerry, providing learners with lifelong opportunities in further education and training.

“It is planned to continue this transformation cycle for Kerry College with the inclusion of further FET centres in Kenmare, Waterville, Cahersiveen, Causeway, and Dingle...”

“Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.”

— Winston Churchill

Reducing Educational Disadvantage in the Pandemic

One working group's efforts to tackle inequality

Marginalised groups have seen their disadvantages worsen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the supports that were in place must now be offered in a different way. A working group dedicated to mitigating educational disadvantage, set up by the author, met throughout 2020 with a singular practical focus on disadvantaged learners in Ireland. This article outlines its work.

Introduction

'The Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption to education in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries,' according to the UN Sustainable Development Group. Over the course of the pandemic, marginalised groups have experienced an exacerbation of disadvantage. The barriers that learners faced before, without adequate supports, are being compounded as a result of the crisis, and many of the supports that were in place must now be offered in a different way.

People with lower levels of qualifications are most likely to have lost their job, to have poorer health, and to have fewer resources to make the shift to remote learning. The challenges impacting on learning are complex, and are made worse by poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation, and lack of essential supports. While significant investments in learner supports were made, it vital to build on collective efforts to identify and address issues across the tertiary education system if we are to tackle educational inequality in a post-Covid-19 context.

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group

At the onset of the pandemic, in March, the Department of Education and Skills quickly established a set of groups to support the continuity of provision in further education and training, higher education, and community education through the crisis, via the Tertiary Education System Steering Group.

As part of this structure, I was tasked with establishing and chairing the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including community education issues) Working Group (MED). The group comprised representatives from across the tertiary education system: thirty-one members representing twenty-three agencies in addition to academic experts (Prof. Tom Collins, Dr



Niamh O'Reilly
CEO, AONTAS

Fergal Finnegan, and Dr Michael Hallissey). It identified issues affecting marginalised learners and offered high-level solutions.

Over the course of twenty-one meetings, most of which were held in March and April, ten papers were produced on a range of key themes: Digital Learning, Assessment, Learner Engagement, Community Education, Educational Equity and Learner Cohort, Tutors and Practitioners, Financial Barriers, Mental Health, Progression, and Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning.¹ The papers scoped out key issues in the short term and proposed recommendations, many of which were supported in the July Stimulus package, Budget 2021, and the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund, which was aimed primarily at community education providers.

Advocacy for supporting community education

During this time, Ireland had a change of government and created a new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), under which community education was set, with the associated ministers. AONTAS was delighted to meet the new Minister, Simon Harris TD, in his first week of office. In July we shared our Proposal for a Covid-19 Community Education Support Fund.

On the eve of Budget Day, 12 October, we welcomed Minister Harris for a virtual visit of community education organisations as part of the event 'Community Education in a Time of Covid-19: Building back better together for community education'. We also shared the AONTAS pre-budget submission, which called for immediate action to address the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on individuals and communities across Ireland.

“I was tasked with establishing and chairing the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group (MED)”

The Minister's announcement of a specific budget of €8 million aimed at mitigating educational disadvantage was welcome and vital in supporting community education organisations to meet the increased need of their learners. This is important, because we know that community education effectively engages people who are most socially excluded, in a supportive local centre that is committed to addressing the multiple forms of disadvantage that learners experience.

Yet despite Ireland having a great tradition of community education, the area remains overlooked and under-resourced, lacking the recognition it deserves at policy level. Notwithstanding the efforts made, emerging data reveals a significant reduction in disadvantaged adults participating in education, particularly in accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Compared to 2019, in 2020 there was an average reduction of 50% in Major Awards attainment at NFQ levels 1-4.

AONTAS members report a demand for community education courses, but because of restrictions, not all learners can be accommodated on-site in centres, or learners do not have the IT devices necessary to engage in learning remotely. This is a particular challenge for non-accredited programmes. The newly announced €8 million fund will go some way to

giving greater opportunities to those who are not currently engaging in learning.

Innovation for evidence-informed policymaking and educational access

A key learning from the MED group was the value of a singular focus on disadvantaged learners, bridging the gap across community, further, and higher education in furthering efforts to mitigate educational disadvantage exacerbated by the pandemic. In taking a tertiary-wide approach to addressing educational disadvantage, high-level themes of access were identified, resulting in a Tertiary Education Student/Learner Support Framework (see image), which brought together six overarching pillars affecting access, while allowing for appropriate sectoral responses.

“It is a critical moment to make significant systemic inroads in making Education for All a reality.”

Commitment to medium- and longer-term monitoring of the impact of Covid-19 necessitates the collation of learner-informed, qualitative, and quantitative research on disadvantaged learners. Proposing methods to mitigate the impact is essential, given the complexity of access and the persistent structural marginalisation of learners.

As the MED group closed in December 2020, there was broad agreement that the new government department, under the leadership of Minister Harris, has an opportunity to make headway in its quest to further its agenda of social inclusion. It can achieve this by building on the work of the MED as a unique structure that focuses on educationally disadvantaged learners through a holistic, learner-centred, rights-based approach.

This cross-sectoral approach, drawing on the expertise of community education organisations, FET providers and bodies, higher education institutions, civil society organisations, learners, and additional experts, would offer a coherent structure that draws together the knowledge, experience, and evidence to inform the Department's access-policy priorities. With the Minister and DFHERIS's commitment to educational equality, and our collective efforts as a community of stakeholders dedicated to access, it is a critical moment to make significant systemic inroads in making education for all a reality.

ENDNOTES

1. The ten papers were developed in collaboration with the MED group by AONTAS: Dr Eve Cobain, Dr Leah Dowdall, Dearbhail Lawless, and Dr Niamh O'Reilly.

Level 8 Degree Courses

Design + Visual Arts

Technology

Film + Media

Business

Humanities

Psychology

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your future**

**Institute of
Art, Design +
Technology
Dún Laoghaire**

iadt.ie/future

Higher Education ⁵

Orientation Week at Trinity College Dublin (pre-COVID)

Orientation Week is widely regarded as an important part of a student's journey to full membership of the student body in one's chosen university. Brimming with atmosphere and packed with activities both informational and entertaining, it is intended as a help to students in making a successful transition to university life.



A New Era for Higher Education?

2020 was a momentous year for higher education in Ireland, with a new government department created in the midst of a global pandemic. Events at home, not least the revised approach to the Leaving Cert exams, produced their own upheaval. This article offers an overview and summary analysis of the main events and casts an eye to future trends.

It is perhaps an understatement to say that 2020 was a more momentous year for higher education (HE) in Ireland than many of us were expecting. The creation of a government department for further and higher education – a new approach to third-level education in the Republic – came in the midst of a global pandemic that fundamentally disrupted teaching at all levels and had a distorting effect on third-level admissions. The events around the Leaving Certificate in 2020 might best be put behind us.

In the midst of all this disruption, however, it is possible to discern the seeds of a new attitude to higher education that, if followed through on, not least with funding, could set the scene for a radical revision of the approach of the last ten years, including in the research space.

Covid-19

When word came through on the morning of 12 March that all educational institutions would be closing their doors from 6 p.m. that evening, initially just for a few weeks, it was not a measure that had come out of thin air, but it was no less disruptive for that. Schools closed, and some laughed at the suggestion that they would remain closed for six months, yet that is exactly what happened.

Universities and other third-level colleges raced to put in place temporary online teaching so that students could finish an academic year which at that point had only a few weeks of teaching left, plus exams. Staff and students alike rushed to familiarise themselves with MS Teams, Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, and more, while emergency marks and standards were put in place to allow some level of mitigation to students, who found themselves trying to learn remotely in a country that has spent years struggling to provide universal internet access.

Though some deadlines were extended, others could not be. Our health system in particular required the timely arrival of its annual intake



Pól Ó Dochartaigh,
Member of the
Royal Irish Academy;
Deputy President
and Registrar, NUI
Galway

of hundreds of newly qualified doctors and nurses if it was to survive, so medical and nursing exams were brought forward. In the end, our third-level institutions extended their work into the summer and ensured that students got through.

The feared meltdown did not materialise, and, if anything, pass rates were up slightly across the country – a fact attributed by some to an increase in time spent on revision because of the closure of the usual places for socialising. That work was intensive, and as it became clear that the pandemic meant we would need online back-up plans for the new academic year, some universities instituted measures requiring staff to take a minimum amount of annual leave during the summer, for fear that one year would elide into preparations for the next and lead to burnout during the semester.

Institutions prepared for the new academic year amid great uncertainty about what would be required. Everyone recognised that it might be necessary to switch to online delivery at short notice, and colleges and universities tried to prepare for as much on-campus delivery as possible while simultaneously backing up material online. Individual requirements in cases where students or staff had medical conditions required more adjustment than ever before. Disciplines had to engage with professional bodies to make sure that any adjustments made did not invalidate the professional accreditation of the degree.

Hard decisions

1 metre vs 2 metres became a theme. A lack of specificity for HE in the Covid-19 guidelines led to some tension between management and academic unions about social distancing in the classroom, before new guidelines – on the Friday before the start of the semester for most universities – moved all but essential and small-group teaching online. For students, hard decisions had to be made about where to locate themselves for the semester. A suggestion made on the radio that students should go to college for the semester and stay there, in order to avoid spreading the virus, met with initial resistance in a country where the weekend trip home with the washing on packed buses and trains is the norm. In the end, a recommendation that everyone should have a single residential base was included in the guidelines when the six-week Level 5 scenario was introduced in mid-October.

Important role of science and research

The role of science and of well-informed, evidence-based research and public debate was evident from the beginning of the pandemic. Our universities contributed significantly and substantively to the immediate exigencies of public health and patient care, particularly working closely with our hospitals and healthcare providers, while NPHE is chaired by Professor Philip Nolan, president of Maynooth University. As the crisis evolved, the need to ‘reimagine our humanity’ emerged as increasingly profound and existential, a point made by Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, president of NUI Galway, in a Moore Institute webinar on ‘Universities and the Covid-19 Crisis’.

“ New guidelines moved all but essential and small-group teaching online.

“ Covid-19 has shown... that social interaction... enhances the development of our young people in an irreplaceable way.

Social isolation, mental health, intergenerational experiences, social inequality, the future of work, and rights and responsibilities came increasingly to the fore – issues that offer a broader canvas and demand a broader perspective in research in and beyond the medical matters of the moment. Our universities responded in turn with webinars, impactful engagement in a virtual world, and interdisciplinary research projects which will hopefully bear fruit as we emerge into another normal, our humanity reimagined.

Financial uncertainty

International recruitment appeared particularly threatened, which posed a challenge given the university sector’s level of dependence on income from this source. Postgraduate Taught numbers dipped, though for many courses the impact on recruitment was mitigated by flexibility in the teaching modes of delivery and the hope that students may be able to attend in spring 2021. Junior Year Abroad was particularly badly hit, an impact that will be felt harder in colleges of arts than elsewhere in the sector. The July stimulus package offered by government was welcomed in all its dimensions, given the significant extra costs incurred by the sector in responding to Covid-19. It could not disguise the expectation, however, that institutions are likely to run at a deficit this academic year.

The long-term consequences for staff and students are as yet unclear. New students are experiencing college life in a way that was previously unknown to most eighteen-year-olds, and more than ever they require resilience and self-motivation in the absence of the casual contact in class, eateries, social clubs, and communal living that are otherwise the norm. Though surveys have shown that many academic and professional staff would prefer a greater ability to work from home in the future, it can surely not be in the interests of eighteen-year-olds to be attending something akin to the Open University, where the student is typically someone mid-career who is highly motivated to put in the extra hours and has the maturity to cope with that experience.

Covid-19 has shown that the walls of our universities are permeable and that social interaction – for staff and students alike – is an aspect of the third-level experience that enhances the development of our young people in an irreplaceable way. It is probably also fair to say that if the staff experience of the last six months were to become permanent, it might attract a very different calibre of individual into academic life than is currently the case. Compromises will be essential.

Leaving Certificate

The 2020 Leaving Certificate was problematic, to put it mildly. Initial proposals to postpone it until August led to colleges and universities planning to admit first-year students in early November, two months after the early September start that all other students would have. Uncertainty around the publication date of the results meant that even this could not be confirmed, so that discussion also included the possibility of a January start – potentially leading to four consecutive semesters for first years, into

the spring of 2022, so that they would catch up by third year; or to those students being taught on a calendar-year basis, with summer break, for their entire degree. Either option would have been extraordinarily disruptive for third-level institutions, potentially requiring some staff to work for almost two years with barely a break, which could have challenged employment as well as health and safety legislation.

When the August plan was abandoned and replaced with a system of calculated grades, there was some trepidation. Teachers in schools had no experience of assessing their pupils' Leaving Cert grades, and immediately there were fears that these could be inflated. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) worked to put oversight and moderation of the grades in place, and this certainly had some effect. When the various jurisdictions in the UK published their estimated grades and it became clear that their approach, highlighted in Scotland in particular, had potentially disadvantaged pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the moderated grades there were raised back to the level of the teachers' original assessments, leading to significant grade inflation, with the result that many universities were oversubscribed.

The system used here was, in the end, more refined than that, but it did not prevent mass grade inflation, which did far more harm in the CAO system than was possible in the UCAS system. In the UK, students who took A levels or Scottish Highers in previous years are offered an unconditional place at the university they apply to, if they meet the entry standard. This has no bearing on the grades required of the current year's cohort, because the grades are set in advance. Thus, mass grade inflation simply meant the universities having to cope with more candidates meeting the grade. By contrast, the CAO system is predicated on the direct comparability of the Leaving Cert grades across the years. Mass inflation of grades in one year creates an imbalance that penalises all those applying with a previous year's Leaving Cert.

And that is exactly what happened. The DES's report on the process showed that the percentage of higher grades awarded this year, especially in higher-level subjects, was significantly above the equivalent percentages in the Leaving Cert for the previous three years, and this drove the mean grade upwards. Calculations showed that in 2017–2019 the mean had been 3.95, 3.97, and 3.98, a very steady set of results. In 2020 the calculated grades system produced a mean of 3.56, 10% higher than in previous years. The teachers' estimates had produced an even higher mean, 3.37, an increase of 15% on the last three years.

There had been no previous evidence to suggest that this year's cohort was 15% stronger academically than all those who had gone before. Inevitably, the minimum entry points went up for a large swathe of courses in the universities and beyond, threatening to leave students with a 2019, 2018, or earlier Leaving Cert outside the door. In the end, government found the funding for thousands of additional places in the hope that this would mitigate the sense of injustice felt by those students, and it seems to have helped.

“ The DES's report showed that the percentage of higher grades awarded this year was significantly above the equivalent percentages in the Leaving Cert for the previous three years.

“ It was Micheál Martin, then Leader of the Opposition in the Dáil, who in July 2019 called for the establishment of a government department focused on higher education.

Still, some problems remain. The number of students admitted to third level in 2020 with a previous year's Leaving Cert ended around 15% lower than the average of the last three years. Some 2020 Leaving Cert students achieved points and entry to courses that they would not have achieved in a normal year, and the fear is that this may result in higher attrition in first year, especially given the far more challenging Covid-19 environment.

When it later transpired that coding errors had caused hundreds of students to obtain higher or lower grades than they were entitled to, that provided its own headaches. Once again, the institutions found ways to accommodate the extra 400+ students who were now entitled to a place on a course because of a raised grade, but many applicants who missed out narrowly were left wondering whether a student who had erroneously been given a higher grade by the coding error, and who would not now be downgraded, had taken the place that the student losing out would otherwise have been entitled to.

Universities and colleges pulled out all the stops, but there is unanimous belief that we cannot and should not be in this position again. One issue is that extra funding a week before the start of the semester does not allow us to recruit the calibre of lecturer that the students are entitled to expect, quite aside from physical capacity issues when teaching returns to campus. In a rapidly evolving situation, everyone reacted as best they could, but we must learn lessons. In 2021 the Leaving Cert should run as normally as possible.

New Department: DFHRRIS

It was Micheál Martin, then Leader of the Opposition in the Dáil, who in July 2019 called for the establishment of a government department focused on higher education. He argued that the 'packed agenda' in education meant that 'higher education tends to get marginalised' and that such a department would have as its sole responsibility a 'focus on higher education and the wider research and knowledge agenda'.

The latter point is critical. As John Walshe noted in *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019–2020*, William Beausang, then of the DES and now of the new department, had suggested that the approach to research funding that focused almost entirely on jobs and business should be broadened, and he was right to do so. He had also noted that since 2008 the allocation of budgets in the DES had shown third level to be the third priority in that department, firmly behind the primary and secondary sectors, with less money allocated despite significant growth in student numbers.

It is to Micheál Martin's credit that as Taoiseach he followed through on this in 2020 to create the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). A mouthful the title may be, but as its minister, Simon Harris, has said, more than 50% of the state's research budget is within its remit – to be allocated, it must be hoped, on criteria driven by more than just the needs of the economy. The title is a clear statement of the government's broad priorities in further and higher education.

It remains to be seen how the priorities of the new department will be mapped out and the extent to which it will draw on the expertise in the sectors in doing so. At the Irish Universities Association's (IUA) Future Ireland event on 23 October 2020, Minister Harris outlined his thinking, seeing the further and higher education sectors as a continuum. He indicated that work is under way on a new funding model for 'the FE/HE sector', as he called it, a lumping together that is often associated with a narrow, skills-based agenda. Yet he also, encouragingly, spoke about 'graduates who progress the way they want to' and in a way that 'meets the needs of an evolving economy and contributes to an inclusive society'. The second of these is at least as important as the first.

The Minister outlined the four pillars of his approach as 1. Innovation Island; 2. Island of Talent; 3. International Island; 4. Island of Inclusion and Engagement. He spoke about the Human Capital Initiative, which government has funded and which the HE and FE sectors have bought into. Micro-credentials are an important part of this initiative and could play a significant role in enhancing lifelong learning, the bedrock of any society that seeks to maintain and renew its talent base.

That principle should apply not only to the acquisition of new skills but to the maintenance and enhancement of existing skills. One need think only of the refresher courses, for example, that teachers in Germany are required to undertake at periodic intervals, outside normal teaching hours and weeks, but which are funded by the state.

Yet flexibility without addressing the core funding issue, one fears, may lead only to frustration on all sides. Extracting and adapting existing modules, as suggested by the Minister at that IUA event, requires significant work. Short-notice initiatives in a sector already working beyond capacity inevitably mean that many of those courses will be taught by part-time staff rather than professional full-time academics. This could lead to a proliferation of part-time contracts and precarious employment, because the institutions cannot undertake the budgetary risk associated with acquiring permanent staff by default or contracts of indefinite duration based on temporary funding for initiatives. A purely skills-driven agenda will also miss the core point that skills are but one aspect of education. It could easily become the undergraduate equivalent to the research funding agenda of recent years.

The thrust of what is being outlined so far is encouraging for the sector and has generated much goodwill, and no doubt there will be a positive approach from all sides in seeking to address the challenges of implementation. There is likely to be widespread support in the sector for an approach that recognises that the economy is just one part of the challenges facing society as a whole and the higher education sector in particular. Sustainability, human rights, and cultural and social development are equally important. Our graduates need to be not only useful to the economy but also critical, creative, and civic-minded members of society. As TCD Provost Paddy Prendergast said at the same event, we need graduates who have both 'the right skills and the right mindset'. The one without the other is only half a talent.

“ **The economy is just one part of the challenges facing society as a whole and the higher education sector in particular.** ”

“ **University of Limerick made the very welcome appointment of Ireland's first female university president, Professor Kerstin Mey.** ”

The future

Some of the initiatives of recent years have continued apace through the changes and challenges. Round 2 of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) aimed at enhancing the presence of women in HE leadership roles has been announced, and in the wider context the University of Limerick made the very welcome appointment of Ireland's first female university president, Professor Kerstin Mey. Prof. Mey, an East German with extensive experience in the North and Great Britain before she came to Limerick, is also from an Arts background, the first such appointment at the level of president in many years. As one of the most important aspects of any agenda for inclusion, this appointment is an important signal for the future in more ways than one.

The implementation of the Technological University agenda continues, and it will clock up its next success on 1 January 2021 with the creation of the Munster Technological University in Cork and Tralee, the post of president having been advertised in the autumn. The government also signalled its intention to enhance cross-border collaboration in the wake of Brexit, and Minister Harris met the Northern universities on 30 October to discuss possibilities. Matching funding from the UK government and/or the Northern Ireland Executive will be critical in this regard, as will the active engagement of the universities in the Republic in laying the landscape for taxpayer funding of cross-border initiatives at a potentially unprecedented scale. The Minister said he intends taking forward a programme of reform of governance of HE, something that has been mooted for several years without concrete action.

One aspect of the HE experience that gained much traction this year was the issue of consent. Research showed that harassment, sexism, and sexual assault are the experience of too many staff and students. One colleague at UCD, Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, recalled how she had been harassed for two years by a senior colleague. A survey of more than 6,000 students carried out by the Active* Consent programme team at NUI Galway showed that a large percentage of students (29% of female students, 10% of male students, 28% of non-binary students) have been subject to sexual assault, and that many of them had not discussed it with anyone before the survey (49% of men assaulted, 35% of women, 25% of non-binary students). Many did not report the assault because they thought it was not serious enough. There is a clear need for full implementation of the 2019 Consent in Higher Education Institutions Framework, so that everyone – students and staff alike – understands the basic principle that consent should be clear, ongoing, mutual, and freely given.

Inclusion takes many forms, and respect is at the core of inclusion. As the Minister said unequivocally on 23 October: 'The University of the 21st century cannot just be an engine for economic growth; it must be a beacon of inclusion.' That is an agenda to which everyone can subscribe and which can sustain the work of the sector into the future. The work will be in the many facets of its implementation. This agenda, if unfolded across the piece, has the potential to usher in a new era for higher education in this country.

2020 saw the creation of a new, dedicated Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. We report and reflect on the department's inception, focus, initial steps, and future promise.

Background to forming the new department

It is a point often made that we, as a people, attach particular value to education. That estimation is founded in the role of education in individual development and as a passport to advancement, both personal and professional. Given the ceiling of fifteen members placed on government under Article 28 of the Constitution, education had until 2020 been overseen by a unitary department. The distinctive role and growth of higher education had been recognised in 2017 through the appointment of Mary Mitchell O'Connor TD as Minister of State with responsibility for the sector.

In July 2019, Mícheál Martin TD, then leader of the opposition, outlined his vision for how universities and other third-level institutions will play a pivotal role in the knowledge economy of the future:

I believe the time has come to consider separating higher education from the Department of Education. Our first- and second-level systems face rising demands to address vital issues such as diversity and inclusion. Areas like special needs education in mainstream settings barely existed twenty years ago and today involve tens of thousands of people. Similarly, the demand to modernise curricula, provide new places, and tackle exclusion mean that there is packed education agenda before you can even consider higher education and research. The creation of a separate Department of Higher Education and Research might be the only way to guarantee both a real priority for this area and to provide strategic leadership. (Martin, 2019)

The timing ensured that this was a theme in the general election of February 2020, and when a coalition government was finally formed in late June 2020, a dedicated department for post-secondary education was agreed upon. It is telling that it took additional time to clarify the title and scope of the new entity; considerations of scale and coherence resulted in both further education and much of the State's research and innovation

A New Departmental Construct

New opportunities for post-second-level education



Orla Flynn
President, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology



Joseph Ryan
CEO, Technological Higher Education Association

activity coming under the aegis of what was to become the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (D/FHERIS) as approved by the cabinet on 13 July 2020.

Focus and potential impact of the new department

Launching a brand-new department with small scale, big spend, and huge ambition was the task facing the inaugural minister, Simon Harris TD, and his secretary general, Jim Breslin. The initial weeks were focused on Covid-19 responses, ensuring liquidity into the system and helping institutions prepare to reopen campuses.

Ensuring the safety of learning communities in a global pandemic could not be the sole focus of the system, even at a time when the early-summer promise over the course of the virus was starting to dissipate with increasing prevalence as society and the economy reopened. Constructive work on equality, diversity, and inclusion along with advancement of the consent agenda were also foregrounded.

The pace of activity was a characteristic of the new regime – as was the central focus on student welfare, consistent with a priority identified by the previous government, a good example being the doubling of the student assistance fund in July 2020.

Investment is crucial

A new department has but a short time to prove the concept. The facility to focus exclusively on post-secondary education was warmly welcomed by the sector, as was the inclusive and open approach adopted by the new ministry. But the test will come in making the case to the wider public and in winning Cabinet support for the scale of investment that is required to deliver on the potential of advanced education to be the type of economic driver that is set out for it in the national policy framework.

At the time of writing, the estimates preparation is under way for what will be the critical October Recovery Plan as outlined in the programme for government. With the recommendations from the Cassells Report (Cassells, 2016) still under consideration in Europe, the coming budget takes on even more relevance as a signifier of the importance of the new department and the sector. As Mícheál Martin, now Taoiseach, recalled, citing a former minister for education, Patrick Hillery, 'Ireland should invest in expanding and renewing higher education "if we believe that the country has a future"' (Martin, 2019).

The separation from second level also heralds an opportunity to re-envision the structure of at least some of our provision and to consider a renewed employment contract that better supports academics to make a contribution commensurate with their individual strengths and talents. This will need to be an inclusive conversation, but the outcome could be liberating for the system, not least for learners.

Clearly the establishment of the separate new D/FHERIS will also have an impact on the key stakeholders across all of these areas. For some this will mean having a much brighter light shining on their endeavours. Included

initially will be the usual suspects: the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), SOLAS, Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), Union of Students in Ireland (USI), and centrally the social partners represented by the higher education unions, but also including the many external groupings that are so essential to the regional connectedness of our institutions.

Having all the key players under a tight umbrella could allow for collaborative navigation through potentially stormy waters. The signals are that the new ministry is determined to tackle the investment challenge identified in the Cassells Report with a view to putting in place a sustainable funding system that will enable a range of deliverables for higher and further education.

While the Action Plan for Education 2019 (D/FHERIS, 2020) includes relevant goals for further and higher education which will form part of the plans for the new department, other new initiatives are also being launched: plans to develop a ten-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy were recently announced. The pandemic has also focused attention on vulnerable students and mental health, and these are predicted to command particular focus in the coming period.

Together, the further and higher education sectors provide the vast majority of graduates who will be employed across public, private, and not-for-profit organisations, from multinational companies to SMEs of all sizes and in all sectors, down to micro-enterprises and start-ups. They make a major contribution to overall economic growth, and thus, more importantly, provide a societal resilience that can help protect our small island and its communities from the buffeting winds of globalisation and populism.

“ **The facility to focus exclusively on post-secondary education was warmly welcomed by the sector, as was the inclusive and open approach adopted by the new ministry.** ”

Linkages and pathways across traditional boundaries

The development of a coherent post-second-level system with genuine linkages and pathways across and between traditional boundaries may seem aspirational, but the new department can deliver clear systemic supports to nurture this. Rethinking received wisdom on educational hierarchies is better facilitated through a department that sponsors all elements of the third-level landscape. Building on work already under way through the Regional Skills Fora, and on the many good progression practices evident around the country, collaborative and connected modes of working together can be recognised and rewarded, including through joint degrees, shared modules, formal linkage schemes, and incentivised collaboration. Assiduously managing such a construct – including, where necessary, revised governance – the new department can better support lifelong learning and realise the ambitions that attach to advancing apprenticeship.

The foregrounding of new and existing models of apprenticeship does indeed provide a welcome new string to the bow of this department; it will be well placed to support and promote a modern perspective of apprenticeship as something complementary to and aligned with existing further and higher education provision, with opportunities across a range of disciplines and trades.

Better alignment of research activity was a consideration in the construction of the new department, and it offers considerable potential. Some of this promise will be realised through the new Technological Universities, which, to grow their own research capacity, can capitalise on the years of relationship-building with the industries, businesses, and communities around them. Key to success here will be collaboration between existing strong university research clusters, the established Science Foundation Ireland Centres, and the emerging Technological Universities whose strengths are complementary.

Encouraging signs?

So far, a mere six months in, the signs are encouraging. The new minister, Simon Harris, has been energetic, meeting a wide range of stakeholders and tackling a multitude of challenges in his brief tenure to date. He is a strong communicator, regularly using social media to advocate for the value of higher and further education.

The pandemic has also enabled him and his departmental colleagues to meet all the relevant stakeholders at a speed that might not have been possible previously. The pace of activity has been all the more impressive given the pandemic's impact on the higher and further education sectors. At national level there has been a collective coherence in the approach to Covid-19, with a united approach to, inter alia, emergency remote teaching, industrial relations, and safe return-to-campus procedures.

Since the department was established, we have seen Covid-related initiatives announced – and funded – relating to mental health, and a student laptop loan scheme with additional capacity to support connectivity, all through a welcome education focus in the July Stimulus.

There were also many 'business as usual' announcements relating to Springboard, the various pillars of the Human Capital Initiative, the active consent framework, the launch of consultation for the development of a new action plan for apprenticeship, and the launch of a further education strategy for the next five years. One particularly welcome announcement was the change to the Student Support Scheme for people living in Direct Provision, which is a strong indication of the ongoing commitment to support access to what is an increasingly inclusive system of education.

Conclusion and forward view

There is no doubt that the new department is welcome, especially among those in the trenches who have been pointing to the enormous significance in Ireland of our higher and further education sector and to our failure to adequately fund it over the last decade. The energy and enthusiasm evident from the structural change is palpable. This new department can make a spectacular impact on the futures of our young people, our unemployed people, and even our existing industries. Our human capital represents our country's principal asset, and from the outset Minister Harris identified an

“ **This new department can make a spectacular impact on the futures of our young people, our unemployed people, and even our existing industries.** ”

economic focus for the new department which would, in his words, 'drive investment into our country' (Harris, 2020).

To realise this will require courage, as well as the conviction that higher and further education belong at the heart of economic, social, and cultural development in all regions of Ireland. Beir bua!

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New Deputy President at Dublin City University

Prof Anne Sinnott was appointed by the Governing Authority of Dublin City University (DCU) in July 2020 as the university's new Deputy President. She succeeded Professor Daire Keogh, who is now President of DCU.

President Daire Keogh welcomed Ms Sinnott as Deputy President and praised her for her knowledge, experience, and for her leadership of DCU Business School.

"She is an advocate of gender equality issues and a leading figure in the university's Women in Leadership initiative..."

"She has also championed innovation in teaching..."

"I congratulate her on her appointment and look forward to working with her in the years ahead as we continue to set the standards for universities in terms of innovation, engagement, and opportunity."

Prof Anne Sinnott said she looked forward to working with the President "to navigate the unusual times ahead which will present us with some challenges but also many opportunities."

Professor Sinnott holds a BA and Higher Diploma in Education from University College Dublin and an MBA and PhD from NUI Galway.

Universities After the Pandemic

What will change and what will remain the same?

The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged universities as never before. This article reflects on the university experience of dealing with the pandemic, and considers what the permanent impact on the higher education sector might be.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has pressure-tested our modern global society in ways it has never been tested before. While the world has experienced pandemics throughout human history, society is now more globalised and interconnected than it has ever been. That globalisation and interconnectedness is evident in global universities like University College Dublin. This article considers the impact that the pandemic is having and will have on global universities.

Impact on teaching and learning

Lockdowns associated with the pandemic forced universities around the world to suddenly start teaching their students at distance through digital technology. Some universities were already primarily online institutions, serving a particular niche in the market, while many also offer some academic programmes online. But most university students elect to take programmes which are usually delivered to a significant extent through face-to-face teaching. In normal times, the majority of academics also prefer to deliver their teaching face to face, and many have been resistant to moving their material online.

The involuntary move to teaching and learning online provided an opportunity to explore just how much can be accomplished by teaching at distance, and which aspects of the face-to-face campus experience are the most important. Various surveys show that students have by and large been satisfied with their online learning experiences, and examination results suggest that student outcomes have largely been preserved. A UCD survey of students' experience during the lockdown showed that the areas they found much more challenging are the human factors: motivation, sustaining concentration, lack of structure to the day, and missing friends. Despite their online experience being generally positive, and 52% of students reporting they were more comfortable with online learning after having this experience, 62% still said they would not undertake learning at distance by choice.



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A UCD survey of employees showed that lack of structure to the working day was also a significant challenge for faculty and staff, as they found themselves working long and irregular hours and finding it difficult to take leave. Many reported that sustaining motivation was a challenge, that interactions with colleagues were more difficult, and that they missed the social interaction with colleagues. Nevertheless, 65% felt their overall productivity was the same or higher working from home. Many appreciated the benefits of working from home, including the saving on commuting time and costs, the flexibility, and the ability to spend more time with family. In fact, 76% said they would like to have the possibility to work part-time from home after the pandemic is over.

These survey results show that key benefits of a campus-based university do not lie in the teaching and learning of the formal curriculum, but rather in being part of a scholarly community which provides a structure to activities, together with motivation and social reward to those who are part of that community. Within this community students develop many 'soft' or generic skills which are not usually formally assessed, including communication, teamworking, leadership, and relationship skills. Without physical interaction with others in both formal and informal learning environments and social environments, these skills are unlikely to be developed to the same level.

Financial impact

For many leading universities, particularly in Western countries, higher education is a business, reliant to a significant extent on the attendance of international students who pay premium fees. The Covid-19 pandemic has considerably reduced and in some cases halted the attendance of these students, impacting on the finances of universities who have come to rely on this income. Providers of student accommodation have been similarly hit, and in many cases universities are the provider and have suffered a further financial loss.

In many respects the planning challenge for universities is the same as for other businesses. The key questions are: Will Covid-19 have a long-term impact on international student numbers, and how long will it take for those numbers to re-stabilise? These questions are difficult to answer, particularly given that the pandemic is not the only variable involved. International relations and diplomacy, perhaps aggravated by the pandemic, are at a low not seen for perhaps thirty years. Geopolitical forces are increasingly impacting on the ability of countries to attract international students.

Ireland is well positioned geopolitically. As a historically neutral country with a tradition of making visitors feel welcome, it remains an attractive destination for international students. Ireland has the advantage of widespread use of the English language as the primary means of communication, and a high-quality, reputable third-level education system.

Although Ireland does not have the same profile as the US, the UK, or Australia, once international students have experienced what Ireland has to offer and convey this experience back to family and friends and post it on social media, other students from the same country then start to

consider Ireland as a study destination. There is a clear snowball effect in international student recruitment, provided students are given a good experience. Conversely, a bad experience or a change in geopolitics can have a negative impact on this recruitment.

There is reason to believe that the international student market will recover rapidly from this setback. Most universities have found that applications from international students for recruitment in the current cycle are at or above 2019 levels. However, travel restrictions, lack of availability of flights and accommodation, and doubt over how much teaching will be delivered face to face have all contributed to an expectation that the final numbers will be down. Nonetheless, this demand is a good indication that, once the virus is under control, teaching arrangements are back to 'normal', and flights and accommodation become readily available, student numbers should return rapidly to or above pre-Covid-19 levels.

Longer-term changes

Another question to be considered is whether teaching arrangements will or should go back to the pre-Covid-19 normal. The relevance of the traditional lecture approach has been questioned in recent times, and some academics and programmes have adopted the so-called flipped classroom model, where course content is placed online for pre-reading, and face-to-face time with instruction is used for discussion or problem-solving. Now that more academics have had experience with the technology required to deliver programmes in this mode, we may well see the approach adopted more widely. In addition, more group work, one-on-one tutorials, and small group tutorials may be done through video conferencing, now that academics and students have seen how well it can work.

“ Some academics have adopted the so-called flipped classroom model, where course content is placed online for pre-reading.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to pronounce the demise of traditional 'chalk and talk' university teaching in its entirety. Lectures are a lived experience. Much as people still attend live theatre and live sports, despite technically better productions being available in their homes through technology, attending a live lecture as part of a group and participating in the interaction between a good lecturer and their class is something which still cannot be completely captured with technology. In addition, graduates need to have developed the skill to be able to sit in an audience, listen to a public address, and correctly assimilate the important information contained in it.

The challenge for universities will be one of balance. If too much material can be done at distance, the number of students who will physically attend teaching activities on campus will decrease. If the proportion of a class attending teaching activities falls below a critical level, the atmosphere and informal learning opportunities are largely lost, and even the few students attending may stop coming. If this happens, the advantages of a campus-based education are lost for the whole group of students.

Universities need to ensure that there are sufficient engaging and valuable teaching and learning activities taking place on campus, together with

appropriate social activities, that the campus is a vibrant place where students wish to spend their time.

Changing societal demands

The pandemic has also accelerated a wave of change in jobs that was already well under way. The rise of artificial intelligence and new techniques of data processing is changing the nature of employment in many companies. Some skill sets are becoming obsolete, particularly those involved in processing of a repetitive nature, while others, notably in technology, machine learning, and data processing, are in high demand. The financial challenge of the pandemic has forced (and permitted) companies to lay off large numbers of workers. Many of those jobs will not return, or not return in their previous form. There will be a need for re-skilling and upskilling of people whose jobs do not return.

Traditional degree programmes are not appropriate for these students and often take a long time to set up through university processes. These students need concise 'micro-credential' programmes which will provide them with the knowledge and skills they need for the evolving job market, perhaps taught in part by professional trainers rather than academics. Universities have the brand, infrastructure, and quality processes which position them well for success in this domain.

Those students undertaking traditional degree programmes will also need a set of enhanced skills. As artificial intelligence reduces the level of human input required for many routine tasks, more and more graduates will be working in areas which require creativity and significant interaction with people, including people from very different backgrounds to their own. Universities will need to rise to the challenge of developing these skills sets.

“ The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated changes that were already in process.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the world in many ways. It has accelerated changes that were already in process, removing businesses that no longer had robust operating models and jobs that were already under threat. It has furloughed businesses in other sectors, such as entertainment, dining, and travel, that will re-emerge stronger and leaner after the pandemic subsides. For universities it has provided both a logistical and a financial challenge. In overcoming the logistical challenge of moving students to online working, academics have been upskilled in their use of distance learning techniques, and this will lead to longer-term changes in how programmes are delivered.

Like the entertainment sector, the international student sector is likely to return to normal relatively quickly once the pandemic is over. However, the temporary financial challenge may well force universities to look carefully at the way they are doing business and to make better use of the digital technology which is now available. Universities must also look carefully at providing all graduates with the skill sets they will need to be successful in a changed future, and at providing micro-credentialled programmes for the upskilling or re-skilling of those who have been made redundant by the evolving technology.

Bridging Brexit: Cross-Border Collaboration in Higher Education

Ulster University's efforts in educational and research collaboration are central to bridging Brexit. The university is part of a formal cross-border further education and higher education cluster, whose founding principle is to enable learning pathways at tertiary level in response to current and future challenges for the region. This article outlines those pathways and shows the strategic importance of cross-border collaboration.

Derry is renowned worldwide for its spirited approach to Hallowe'en, but with a potential no-deal Brexit looming, *Samhain 2020* is a little spookier than normal. As the UK's exit from the EU plays out against the backdrop of Covid-19, cross-border collaboration in education and research provides no little solace in these anxious times.

Ní neart go cur le chéile ('there is no strength without unity') was the message of EU President Donald Tusk after his meeting with then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar in December 2017. Since then this adage has been adopted by communities the length and breadth of the island in the face of Covid-19.

Ulster University's track record in research collaboration and partnership programming in teaching is central to bridging Brexit. As a civic university with a regional mission, our concerns about a potential no-deal Brexit are many and varied. With two campuses in Greater Belfast (city centre and Jordanstown) and two in the North West (Coleraine and Magee), we have staff, researchers, and students who cross the border daily to work, learn, and collaborate. Brexit has implications for every facet of our work, nowhere more so than at the Magee campus situated just three miles from the UK-EU international frontier.

Cross-border collaboration as a bridge forward

Brexit has cast a menacing shadow for some time now, so how are we responding to the challenge? We are members of a formal cross-border further education and higher education cluster with Letterkenny IT (LYIT), North West Regional College (NWRC), and Donegal Education and Training Board. This North West FE-HE cluster, supported since its foundation in 2018 by the Irish Higher Education Authority, is a key antidote to post-Brexit obstacles, its founding principle being



Malachy Ó Néill
Ulster University

to enable learning pathways at tertiary level in response to current and future challenges for the region.

The success of the cluster is due in no small part to the foresight of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, co-chaired by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council and incorporating key stakeholders in education, research, and industry. It has a unique interjurisdictional structure, endorsed by both governments through the North-South Ministerial Council, and supports the global positioning of the region as a location for foreign direct investment.

This collaborative approach provides a strong foundation to tackle the challenges ahead, all parties engaging with local Chambers of Commerce to invest time in jointly understanding the issues arising from a North West perspective. The agreed objective is to pursue strategic plans that will enable economic growth and minimise the impact of Brexit, aligning our strategic approach so we achieve growth via the stewardship of education and a smart industry board.

Colleagues have remarked to me that they have never seen such a conscious effort to work together. Our attitude has shifted towards looking at how the border can become a bridge and a pathway for the benefit of students and employees on either side, aligning teaching and research programmes with industry requirements and government priorities.

We are exploring ways to make more cross-border collaboration happen through research and teaching activities. For example, increased employability in the fintech (financial technology) sector has encouraged us to partner with NWRC on the sixth FinTru North West Financial Services Academy, offering twenty graduate training places in each iteration and fantastic employment outcomes built in.

Together with LYIT we have developed and delivered a joint master's degree in Innovation Management in the Public Sector, now in its fifteenth year, and new collaborations will include trans-jurisdictional taxation, export, and enterprise. Data science is also a growth area in both Derry and Letterkenny. Collaborative provisions in support of smart industries are a shared focus at present, and we look forward to identifying even more opportunities for collaboration.

Research is an international endeavour

Research partnerships, both local and global, are vital in creating world-leading centres of excellence which define a university city or region. While Ulster's research income has doubled over the last four years through large-scale collaboration with other universities and industry partners, we have diversified our funding income mix, moving more towards UK research and innovation funded projects. EU research contracts are still highly significant to us, however, and we very much hope that UK universities can continue to participate in Horizon Europe beyond Brexit.

Collaborative networks continue to evolve and new projects emerge. The EpiCentre has been a key enabler for new research centres which City Deal will deliver for Derry. This is a multi-million-pound technology

partnership, established in 2008, between LYIT, NWRC, and Ulster's Intelligent Systems Research Centre at Magee which provided practical support for electronics and engineering companies in the North West.

The £38m Cognitive Analytics Research Lab (CARL) and the Centre for the Industrialisation and Digitisation of Robotics and Automation (CIDRA) also have critical roles to play. CARL will help businesses become world-leading in their use of artificial intelligence and data analytics, while CIDRA will enable industry to unlock the powerful potential of automation and robotics and to up-skill staff.

Since 2014 we have engaged in over ninety projects with c.£35m in grant income; around half of these have involved cross-border collaboration. Exemplars include the 'Crossing Borders, Breaking Boundaries' project to tackle discrimination; the North West Centre for Advanced Manufacturing; the Health Technology Hub; the Northern Ireland Centre for Stratified Medicine; and the Centre for Personalised Medicine, a cross-border collaborative project involving thirteen partner organisations.

Cross-border collaboration remains a key tenet of our research strategy, and healthcare innovation is particularly important in enhancing and defining the region. C-TRIC, the Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre at Altnagelvin, is now in its second decade. The expansion of world-class personalised medicine research facilities via THRIVE – a new health research institute aligned to City Deal – alongside the School of Medicine opening at Magee in 2021 will increase the region's attractiveness as a place to study, live, and work.

Since 2013 the Magee campus has been home to Ireland's only Magnetoencephalography facility, a £5.3m facility which measures brain activity. This research infrastructure enables academics in Ulster to lead island-wide responses to the current pandemic, such as Dr Magda Bucholc's coordination of track-and-trace analytics, and Prof. Tony Bjourson and Dr Victoria McGilligan, who have just received significant Covid-19-specific research funding from Science Foundation Ireland.

The scale of collaboration in the North West will inevitably lead to more projects in areas such as health, intelligent systems, and public sector policy – all priority areas for government both north and south. In this way the border will become a bridge, and the unique trans-jurisdictional partnership of the North West cluster will enable placement opportunities and dual accreditation for graduates in the region.

Supporting students and staff around Brexit

Cross-border cooperation and student mobility are crucial from an economic, social, and cultural perspective. The UK government, in its white paper 'The Future Relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union', committed to 'facilitating mobility for students and young people, enabling them to continue to benefit from world-leading universities' once the UK leaves the EU. Universities UK (UUK), of which Ulster University is a member, is calling on the UK government to use the upcoming Immigration Bill to ensure that future academic and student mobility is not impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy, regardless of the

immigration status of EU/EEA nationals after the UK has left the EU. Building and preserving that border bridge is pivotal.

Take Sophie Carlin, for example, a nineteen-year old student from Donegal. Sophie is doing a voluntary third-year placement at C-TRIC in Derry, supported by Optum Ireland as a healthcare scholar. Sophie drives across the border every day to take part in a world-class research project on childhood cancer with Dr Kyle Matchett. She wishes to pursue a career in cancer research.

This is just one student, but thinking of Sophie traversing the border seamlessly every day is an example of what good looks like. We work every day to make this region an attractive place to stay and to pursue a career. Student mobility needs to be protected at all costs.

Ulster University values co-operation with partners from Europe and across the world. We were pleased to see that the Irish government's Brexit Readiness Action Plan references schemes to allow continued participation in Erasmus+ for eligible students in Northern Ireland institutions. We are looking at how we can best support existing and future staff in terms of their 'settled' or 'pre-settled status'. We want government to ensure there are no barriers to attracting world-class staff or inhibitors to collaboration on research.

Continued growth 'in between'

Rather than being on the periphery of European and UK research and innovation centres, North West city region's collaborative approach has enabled this place to position itself as the bridge, the conduit through which interjurisdictional creative and learning pathways can prosper. In his collection *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Séamus Heaney recalled growing up between two traditions and achieving equilibrium therein:

*Two buckets were easier carried than one
I grew up in between.*

Ireland's North West, and the region's academic, industry, and civic leaders, stand ready to embrace opportunities as the bridge 'in between'. The most impactful research is achieved when experts from different institutions in different parts of the world work together. International and interjurisdictional cooperation must be protected and facilitated in a post-Brexit world as we all find our footing with the threat of Covid-19 still with us.

Research-led teaching is about the next generation of thinkers, developing a skilled workforce that will help local companies make an impact on the global stage. While challenges like Brexit and Covid-19 were unforeseen for many of us, new possibilities will arise as a result of them. The future is not yet written, but let's learn from our past and stay focused on a strategic, aligned, and collaborative approach. Let's bridge Brexit for a brighter future for us all. *Ní neart go cur le chéile!*

The Role of Technology and Online Learning in Higher Education

Engaging with postgraduate students online

This article offers ideas on how to engage with online students on a taught MA programme. In the wake of Covid-19, online engagement has become a critical part of online delivery and facilitation, with many third-level courses suddenly having to adapt to an online offering.

Online engagement through content

This article focuses on postgraduate engagement. What works for postgraduate students may not necessarily work as well with undergraduate students, and what works with one faculty may not work with another. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

There are many ways to engage postgraduate students online, including the provision of high-quality digital learning resources, made available through a virtual learning environment (VLE), which can be used in a personalised manner. A growing body of research identifies how students engage in online learning and their use of mobile devices to access learning resources. Many published studies indicate that students regularly access a variety of materials, in various ways, through mobile devices (Marcus-Quinn and Cleary, 2015).

During the rapid move to online teaching in March 2020, many faculty members considered offering video content to students. While there are advantages to using video, sometimes an audio podcast is the better choice for both faculty and students. For faculty, the benefits of audio include less-onerous production values compared to what is required to produce good video content. For students, the benefits include more freedom in where and how they can listen, and many students with limited connectivity may find it easier to download a small audio file than to live-stream a lecture.

Asynchronous and synchronous engagement

Online engagement can take many forms, including asynchronous and synchronous engagement using online discussion and live chat in an institutional VLE. What is meant by engagement? Trowler (2003) defines student engagement as being concerned with the interaction 'between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the



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learning outcomes and development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution'. Trowler's definition places the responsibility for engagement on students, teachers, and institutions and sees positive engagement translating into better learning outcomes for the students and a better reputation and possibly a better ranking for the institution.

The last decade has seen an increase in the literature highlighting the importance of students' online engagement. Chen et al. (2010) note:

students who utilize the Web and Internet technologies in their learning tend to score higher in the traditional student engagement measures (e.g. level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment), they also are more likely to make use of deep approaches of learning like higher order thinking, reflective learning, and integrative learning in their study and they reported higher gains in general education, practical competence, and personal and social development.

We are in a golden age of online resources, but we must be cognisant of what we are expecting of students, and we must recognise that students have many demands on their time outside of study.

Learning analytics and tracking engagement

Learning analytics has enabled faculty to track student activity in VLEs. But this raises the question of whether we should. While there may be merit in tracking some aspects of online activity, it can also be problematic. Research by Osborne et al. (2018) concluded that 'supporting and assessing students in such a forum remains contentious'. Nevertheless, online engagement – particularly for distance and online students – does make a difference.

In a 2008 study, Campbell et al. found: 'Online discussions are associated with at least as good results as face-to-face seminar discussions in a web-based postgraduate research methods course. This study also found that an increased use of online resources, including web sites and discussion boards, is associated with higher student achievement.'

Online engagement is about more than merely accessing course materials. Student participation in online asynchronous discussions and synchronous chat sessions can be hugely beneficial, but what happens when some students do not want to, or cannot, engage in these activities? Some research suggests awarding marks for these activities. But tracking and assessing online engagement is complex, and developing a grading rubric can be challenging. There are many external factors to be considered. Osborne et al. (2018) note: 'Many factors impacted on student interaction ... including a lack of time due to paid work and other coursework and assessments.'

In Ireland, connectivity adds another layer of difficulty to building in assessed participation in online discussion. There have been several surveys over the past year or so on Irish people's satisfaction with broadband. Many reported a high level of dissatisfaction with the level of connectivity. It is also important to note that many postgraduate students have to balance

“ A 2008 study found that an increased use of online resources is associated with higher student achievement.

“ Introducing students to a weekly discussion topic early in the semester can foster a culture for students to engage in discussion with their peers.

caring duties. Kahu (2013) highlights the 'lifeload' that many distance and online students have to juggle alongside their studies. This was particularly evident during the school closures associated with Covid-19 in 2020. It would have been difficult for many to engage and participate in meaningful online discussion. Likewise, many faculty members have had to juggle caring responsibilities with their online tasks. We must therefore be realistic in our expectation of online student participation.

Challenges of online engagement

In the midst of such challenges, what can we do to try to engage our students online?

The traditional classroom content needs to be adapted, but how? Podcasts can work very well. Typically, a 45-minute lecture can become a 15- or 20-minute podcast after a heavy edit. Many lecturers report that recording a live lecture does not work well. Discourse markers which sound fine in a physical classroom with the content of space and other props do not work so well in a podcast. Slight pauses in a class, made for emphasis or to give students a few moments to reflect, seem much longer in a podcast.

Other strategies include one-on-one learning conferences. Engaging students online through targeted feedback can work quite well in a discussion forum or chat session. Audio feedback is another option that can be used to deliver feedback quickly to students. Introducing students to a weekly discussion topic early in the semester can foster a culture in the class group for students to engage in discussion with their peers. As the academic year progresses and the cohort get to know one another a little better, many faculty notice the discussion forum getting more traffic.

Necessary supports for online engagement

A number of supports are necessary for successful online engagement. Many third-level institutions do not yet have a comprehensive set of guidelines for using virtual learning environments. A common set of guidelines would be really useful, because we often expect that students will behave in a certain manner when using online discussion and chat, and they may not. This can create problems in the group dynamic.

It is important to be mindful that not all students will have the same academic ambition, so they will not all contribute equally. Likewise, an enthusiastic cohort will engage meaningfully from the outset, whereas some groups may not move beyond a superficial level.

Scalability is another key issue in online engagement. A synchronous discussion or chat with thirty students can be managed without too much trouble. But if the class is much bigger than this, it becomes almost impossible to monitor effectively, and a different approach is required. There is a heavy workload involved in setting up, monitoring, and assessing online discussions, but it is possible to design and structure them.

Conclusion

With Covid-19 and the pivot to online, there is no doubt that online programmes will be necessary for the foreseeable future. It is critical that we learn from what works and, more importantly, what has not. Good communication with students is imperative if a positive online space is to be created and nurtured. Postgraduate students are autonomous and self-regulated, and it is important that they be allowed to contribute to this space without too much regulation – but there must be rules.

Talking with colleagues is also necessary so that students have a clear picture of what they can expect from their online space. This is especially important if you are going to try to assess the online discussion or chat. If students are also having to engage with assessed online e-tivities, they may well be over-burdened at certain points in the semester.

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“When it comes to eLearning, content means everything. If eLearning content is not masterfully designed, all the rest will just go down the drain.”

– Christopher Pappas

Social Engagement Experiences of Disabled Students in Higher Education

The social engagement of students in higher education leads to the development of a sense of belonging, resulting in greater student retention. Internationally, disabled students have been found to face additional barriers to their social engagement. This article presents the author's PhD research on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. It summarises the findings and reflects on their significance in the new Covid-19 environment.

Little did I know, when I began higher education (HE), that I was among only 1% of the student population with a disability (AHEAD, 2019) and the only student in my secondary school to attend university that year. I was an outgoing student, but the impact of my disability and the barriers I faced made attending HE an isolating experience.

That all began to change in my second year in college, when my brother began, and we lived together on campus with another disabled student. I got to know more disabled and non-disabled peers on the residence, and we formed a community. We drank tea, and lived, loved, and learned together. My confidence grew, and although the impact of my disability and the structural barriers I faced never changed, it did not seem to matter as much.

Together we established a student disability peer group and a wheelchair basketball team. I represented my class, and eventually the entire student body, as Students' Union welfare officer. As a group, we brought about change in our institution. Despite this, there were many other significantly disabled students who could not participate due to a lack of supports. We were unable to remove all the barriers to enable our peers to engage fully.

Following my master's dissertation on the employment of disabled graduates, I learnt that the impact of the barriers to the social engagement of disabled students in HE had a longer-term effect on their employment opportunities. I learnt that disabled students struggle to transition to HE due to similar barriers that I and others had faced. I realised there was very little focus on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). I wanted to develop a greater understanding of these experiences in Ireland.



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My doctoral research explores the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland (Rath, 2020). It focuses on the barriers and enablers to their engagement, students' sense of belonging in HE, and how national policies and institutional-level policies and practices foster or impede the process of social engagement.

Transition to and participation in HE have been identified with greater quality of life and as a major precondition for accessing employment and, correspondingly, social inclusion (Ebersold, 2012). Historically, disabled students have been under-represented in HE. Greater progression rates have resulted from a combination of national policies, through the widening participation agenda, supported by resources, and the establishment of a structure to support disabled students in HE (AHEAD, 2019).

During the transition, and once students progress to HE, they face additional challenges, including attitudinal, structural, and academic barriers that their peers do not face (McGuckin et al., 2013). A successful transition and full engagement have been found to be critical to student success and greater retention (Thomas, 2012). Engagement has been identified as especially beneficial for students least prepared for the transition or those from under-represented groups (Trowler & Trowler, 2011). Although many international higher education institutes (HEIs) have made progress towards creating accessible academic programmes for disabled students and providing academic supports, co-curricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less attention (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Engaging socially, both in and outside the class, allows students to develop social and cultural capital, graduate attributes, and skills that will be essential upon progressing to employment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It helps students to develop the leadership skills to have their voice heard. Creating a climate in HEIs that enables the amplification of diverse voices is critical to implementing the widening participation agenda.

Social engagement helps to create a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Those who feel like they belong report higher levels of enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, and interest and are more confident in engaging with learning activities (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Internationally, disabled students have been found to face barriers to their social engagement (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012), impacting upon their sense of community and belonging. In Ireland, disabled people face barriers to their wider social participation (Watson & Nolan, 2011). In the literature there has been little focus on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

My research combined a transformative approach with the bioecological model. The philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm offered me a framework to directly engage disabled people, and the bioecological model allowed me to examine the barriers and enablers to their engagement in the system around them. I developed a four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection research design. A range of qualitative methodologies enabled the removal of barriers to participation.

“ Those who feel like they belong report higher levels of enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, and interest.

“ Most students reported feeling a sense of belonging in their institution, but students reported being uncertain about their in-class sense of belonging.

The sampling strategy brought together data from sixty-five participants, with representatives from nineteen HEIs across Ireland. By capturing a diverse range of data from diverse sources (Walton, 2014), including current students, disabled graduates, full-time student union officers, senior managers, and disability support personnel, the research provided the integral knowledge for transformational research (Mertens, 2017) while viewing the many layers of the system in which the student was embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This approach yielded a lot of extremely rich data, which was analysed using a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Four superordinate themes were identified: transitions, engagement, college climate, and structures. The key research findings were then synthesised and discussed.

The findings demonstrated the value that disabled students place on their social engagement and its contribution to their sense of belonging. Most disabled students considered themselves to be socially engaged and to have a positive student experience. However, almost all disabled students and graduates spoke of barriers to their social engagement, with some having very limited or no social engagement. Social engagement was recognised as vital to the formation of connections that lead to a sense of belonging.

Most students reported feeling a sense of belonging in their institution, but students reported being uncertain about their in-class sense of belonging. Half of all disabled students believed there was no disability awareness in their college and that their non-disabled peers were less aware of disability than the staff. Hearing the student voice, participants said, was critical to engagement and to the creation of a sense of belonging. Most senior managers were unaware of any disabled student in senior leadership positions in their institutions.

The research found that persistent barriers had a major impact on students' sense of value; ability to maintain friendships; ability to develop a sense of belonging, including in class; and engagement with leadership opportunities. There was little evidence of a strategic approach to disabled students' social engagement, or knowledge of how to achieve it. Disability support staff and senior managers reported that in a competitive EDI (equality, diversity, and inclusion) environment, disability can fall down the list of priorities.

The research shows that developing effective policy in relation to disabled students in HE requires a clear understanding of their lived experience. It highlights the need to implement national and institutional-level policy, structures, support, and resources to enable the social engagement of all disabled students, and a mechanism to ensure their voice is heard in HEI.

Since completing the research, I've reflected on my own college experience and questioned what has changed. There have been clear improvements: the number of disabled students attending HE has increased, and academic supports have improved. Current disabled students evidently face similar barriers to their social engagement that I experienced when I began. Disabled students continue to face systemic barriers, and the principles of student engagement (HEA, 2016) are not being universally implemented

with them in mind. The social engagement of disabled students needs to be seen as a priority, and the fundamental elements need to be addressed: to create a college climate in which disabled students can socially engage, have their voice heard, are valued, and feel like they belong.

The relevance of this research is in its groundbreaking nature, but it is particularly significant in Ireland in 2020, when the delivery of HE has had to undergo a rapid metamorphosis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It appears that how students engage socially with their HEI and with each other will change permanently. There has been an appreciation among the general public of the impact of social isolation, something disabled people face on a daily basis.

We must consider how we create a sense of belonging for those who are not in the room, those who do not have a place at the decision-making table. These changes, in the context of the ratified UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), offer an opportunity to reimagine how we support and engage all students. Now, more than ever, it is essential that we include the voice of disabled students in this process and ensure that they have a seat at the decision-making table.

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Check your facts and challenge your sources, An Taoiseach urges students



Speaking at the UCC Conferings of the class of 2020, the Fianna Fáil leader and Cork native Micheál Martin urged the almost 5,000 new graduates to use their education to determine the trustworthiness of information.

"In the current era of change, disruption and threat, the need to challenge, question and verify facts has never been more important. Use your education, and the confidence and opportunity it gives you, to always check facts and challenge where they come from. Your communities and your society will be relying on you," he said.

This article explores how Hibernia College, as a higher education institution, adapted to full-time online teaching, learning, and assessment during Covid-19. It reflects on changing pedagogies and the formation of a reimagined identity for teacher educators.

Introduction

When the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) declared a global pandemic on 12 March 2020, our lives changed rapidly. It had been over a century since the last pandemic, and suddenly we found ourselves unprepared as cases of Covid-19 surged relentlessly throughout the world. For many of us, the 'assumptive world' (Parkes & Weiss, 1983), in which we assume our lives continue as they always have, changed overnight. In education, the transition to online teaching was rapid, prompting opportunities and challenges.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, where practice forms the kernel of teaching, learning, and assessment, were greatly impacted. Shifting their foundation required significant innovation from providers, who had to balance the needs of external agencies and programme accreditation with the needs of students and internal provision. Almost overnight, our identity as teacher educators changed as physical classrooms and lecture halls were closed. The seismic shift in how we taught was a shock for many, but it also provided great opportunity for meaningful innovations.

Having more than twenty years' experience in blended learning helped us as a college to transition to full-time remote learning. Remaining solution-focused, we embraced the move from having 45% of our content taught online to a 100% virtual learning experience for our student teachers. To adapt fully to the move online, the academic team needed to re-examine core teaching pedagogies and develop new ways of engaging with students. Most notably, emerging issues were the need for faculty to (a) examine existing notions of teacher identity, (b) foster a community of learners with opportunities to collaborate and build connections, and (c) reconfigure assessment structures and practices.

Teacher identity

Covid-19 instigated a shift in our teacher identities when all that was familiar had changed. For many educators, this evolving identity required parallel

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment during Covid-19

Reflections from the frontline of higher education



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shifts in their conceptions of who they are as teachers and in what they believe is important as they develop their 'electronic pedagogy' (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). To support this changing role, significant investment was required in faculty's professional development. Hibernia College established a teacher support website to support educators' pedagogical role. In addition to these resources, we designed a series of live weekly webinars where teachers could see and experience the digital tools in action. These were extremely well attended, and soon a community of practice formed online. Teachers valued their colleagues' sharing of experiences and the exchange of good practice (see www.teachersupport.ie).

Identity evolves as teachers gain experience, consolidate professional knowledge, and adopt plans of personal and professional development (Tsui, 2007). When surveyed, our faculty discussed what worked during the transition to online teaching and what could be improved to enhance the experience for their students:

The small-group work is essential and to allow space for raising/noting concerns and issues maybe not covered in the presentations and hear the voices that are often silent! Vital to have space for questions and feedback so as to know what students have understood around the material, and any concerns they may have.

If students in the break-outs had an opportunity to pose a question to us [staff], based on foundation content, as a way of opening up a genuine conversation. And that is what we should aim for, I think, to move beyond Q&A, beyond task completion, and create a real conversation for 30 minutes.

Use polls more, to involve students in another way. Mentimeter or Kahoot would add another element of interactivity. Overall, we might shift the balance slightly from presentation to participation. I also think it might be worth asking to develop the flipped learning a little ... make their task more specific, more demanding, more central to the day.

“ **The social dimensions of learning, and how connected students feel, are increasingly acknowledged as central to their engagement and well-being.** ”

When faculty engaged with new ways of teaching online in collaboration with others, it gave them an avenue to critically engage, giving them the confidence to try new approaches.

Fostering a community of learners

At the heart of all good teaching is the teacher's relationship with their students. That does not change with the transition to online. The social dimensions of learning and how connected students feel are increasingly acknowledged as central to their engagement and well-being, and this is even more critical online. In the virtual world, student engagement is a prerequisite for learning (Guo et al., 2014). For some teachers, however, interactions can seem cold online.

The increasing use of an ever-expanding range of digital technologies continues to affect methods of engaging with learners and of creating and providing high-quality learning environments that are increasingly

personalised, media-rich, and interactive. In our online teaching we showed faculty the tools to maintain effective social relationships between learners and teachers and between teachers themselves. We presented examples of digital tools to promote engagement and connection and stimulate discussion. We saw first-hand how effective and timely communication with students puts them at ease and reduces any anxieties they may have: webinars, emails, and phone calls have all provided effective.

Our incoming student teachers in spring 2020 never met us in person. Their orientation day should have been a face-to-face event but was moved online. The class of September 2020 are also unlikely to meet peers for some time. To help a smooth transition and support the development of a community of learners, we established a digital café on Zoom and scheduled it weekly. This provided a space for student teachers to meet informally and build collegiality. The cafés were optional, but students found them very helpful to create bonds:

Worthwhile, nice to get a chance to speak to your classmates. Beneficial to bounce ideas off one another.

I really enjoyed it. It was great to finally meet and chat with our group as best we could. It was also nice to ask one another questions regarding course content, as some, including myself, are still a little uncomfortable asking questions in the bigger group.

It was a nice informal way to chat to fellow students and nice to have a space we can do this, especially in current times. Great idea.

We also looked at our approaches to collaborative learning. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently evidenced the benefits of collaborative learning (Hattie, 2009; Educational Endowment Foundation, 2020) in fostering critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas, and evaluation of others' ideas and reflection (Gokhale, 1995, 1996; Higgins et al., 2012). The method we used allowed for collaborative teaching: a number of lecturers taught in an online classroom before moving in and out of break-out rooms. Students praised this move:

I liked the fact that there were different tutors contributing throughout the day with very different styles and presentation methods (something as small as having a different styled deck of slides made a difference). It always worked best when there was a second lecturer clarifying points and answering questions in the chat box.

Your department took a group of strangers and gave us the tools and support to become friends and classmates, to share our ideas in discussion groups and lean on each other for support and help without ever meeting each other face to face. I've found online teaching really exciting, but challenging too – and I know my students! I can only guess how much work must have gone into creating a space to build such a community behind the scenes.

“ To help support the development of a community of learners, we established a digital café on Zoom.

“ The oral exam was moved to Zoom, school placement assessment moved to a reflective online interview, and written exams were replaced with take-home papers.

Reconfiguring assessment structures

Contingency plans for assessment were possibly the most challenging, particularly for practice placement modules. Assessments had to be adapted to suit the new restrictions: the oral exam was moved to Zoom, school placement assessment moved to a reflective online interview, and written exams were replaced with take-home papers. In student teacher research, for some cohorts, submission dates were extended, and students were given guidance on data collection in the constrained circumstances. For other cohorts, the research project will now be desk-based and focus on an integrative literature review methodology. These were new experiences for the college, and ensuring academic integrity was paramount. Guidelines were written for these new exams, to support students and assessors and to ensure academic integrity.

The use of video in assessment was another new and worthwhile development. As well as fostering digital and communication skills, it helped to create an invaluable personal link between the student and college. Key to ensuring the success and accountability of this process was the rigorous review of learning outcomes, grade descriptors, and marking systems, the creation of targeted sample questions, and the selection and training of assessors.

As part of our revised assessment for placement, we incorporated a new form of online reflection in a forum called Community of Learners. The aim was to give students an opportunity to participate in an online community of learners based on shared beliefs, values, and experiences of placement. We introduced it to the students at a webinar and outlined the criteria for participation. Students were given daily topics for discussion and were asked to make four daily contributions. The topics were based on their experiences on school placement and related to areas we had noted as challenging, engaging, and worth exploring.

During a subsequent interview assessment, some students highlighted this as a highly collaborative and beneficial opportunity to engage in professional discussion. Some said it would encourage them to actively engage in collegial professional discussions in their future workplace. The experience has prompted us to consider using this format of reflection during future school placements.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has fuelled the debate on online learning. It is important to recognise that online teaching is a complex task that requires commitment and can be time-consuming and demanding. All teachers must be trained to design and deliver online, with professional development that focuses on both the use of technology and online pedagogy. Effective online teaching requires the skills of a team who can contribute their knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology, which go hand in hand. Ultimately, teaching in the digital age requires a paradigm shift whereby 'the responsibility and to some extent the power to change lies within teachers and instructors themselves' (Bates, 2015, p. 436).

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“If you're successful in delivering eLearning, the learner won't be focused on the “e” part, they'll just be focused on how awesome the “Learning” part is.”

– Keith Philips

Travellers in Higher Education: Ambition and obstacles

Travellers' growing educational ambition has emerged despite multigenerational discrimination and disadvantage. Covid-19-related strategies have exposed the fragility of this progress and threaten to reverse it, creating a lost education generation. Higher education institutions must engage with Traveller communities and support current and potential Traveller students. The power of community engagement has been shown in recent events, where Traveller students and organisations voiced their concerns and called for change to rights-based policies and practice.

Traveller educational ambition is visible and growing, as ably demonstrated by the recent PhDs and ongoing scholarship of Rosaleen McDonagh, Sindy Joyce, and Hannah McGinley, as well as contributions by others, including Travellers who since 1985, have successfully completed professional degree and postgraduate programmes in Maynooth University. This ambition has emerged despite well-documented multigenerational Traveller educational disadvantage and discrimination (see, e.g., Kenny, 1987; Oireachtas, 2020).

The current pandemic is widening educational disadvantage for marginalised and minority groups, as noted by the ad hoc Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Group on associated issues for learners in further and higher education. The exacerbation of Travellers' educational disadvantage by Covid-19 has engendered new marginalising forces and laid bare longstanding fractures in relations between Travellers and the education system, and threatens to create a lost education generation. The very modest progress towards reversing the consequences of the 2008 Traveller education cuts is in danger of obliteration.

Below we provide a brief background on Traveller education overall, and explore issues for Travellers' higher education access, participation, and outcomes as articulated by Travellers and Traveller organisations during the pandemic.

Travellers and Roma in education

In the 2016 Census, 0.7% of the population (31,000 people) registered as Travellers, a figure widely understood to represent an undercount of around 25%. Almost 60% were aged under twenty-four years (CSO, 2017). Historically, Travellers were commercial nomads, supplying goods and services



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to the settled population. Their services were needed, but they themselves were not wanted: history and folklore testify to hostile settled-Traveller relations, underpinned by centuries of racist exclusion from life chances that were the norm for the settled population.

Recognition of Traveller ethnicity in 2017 was a significant marker in their journey towards rights and equality. It also warrants a right-based approach to education institutions' engagement with Traveller communities and students. This rights-based approach requires that two key themes inform all aspects of the system, for all:

- visible recognition of and respect for Traveller identity, culture, and history
- visible recognition of institutional and societal anti-Traveller racism, and strong and positive implementation of anti-racist policies, from institutional to interpersonal levels.

The recent report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Roma and Travellers in Six Countries* (September 2020), highlights the urgency of Travellers' situation in Ireland. Irish Traveller children's enrolment rates are reasonable: 75% of those eligible are enrolled in early childhood education, and 96% are in formal education up to age sixteen.

While this indicates increased educational ambition, enrolment is not the same as attendance; engagement and outcomes remain deeply inadequate. Even before Covid-19, Traveller engagement with education remained threatened by societal resistance blocking their access to the world of work.

“ **Recognition of Traveller ethnicity in 2017 was a significant marker in their journey towards rights and equality.** ”

Foundations for success in higher education

For any students, especially marginalised students such as Travellers, access to and progress in higher education demand successful completion of preschool, primary, and post-primary stages, in high-quality provision which engages with learners' communities. It also requires system engagement with adult Traveller learners, many with negative previous experiences of education.

Pavee Point and other Traveller organisations maintain strong focus on education as key to securing Travellers' full economic, social, and cultural rights and participation in and contribution to society. The organisations called for a National Traveller Education Strategy, now a belated but welcome inclusion in the 2020 *Programme for Government*, and requiring immediate action.

Education actions in *The National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017/2021* (NTRIS) include bullying research, four pilot education initiatives, and inclusion of Traveller history and culture in curricula. However, progress to implement NTRIS remains slow overall, and the longstanding mainstreaming approach of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) can result in practices which inhibit the special measures essential for Travellers' educational equality and recommended by Ireland's international human rights commitments reviews (e.g., CERD, 2020).

This need for special measures is recognised in the DES/Higher Education Authority (HEA) 2018 *Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021* (NAP), which names Travellers as a priority group and sets a target of eighty full-time students. Though easily criticised as low, this target-setting focused providers on their responses, which were further engaged by the DES's 2019 *Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019–2021* (TAP).

Current and Covid-19 issues

The *Implications of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma Transfer to and Progression within Higher Education* (2020) report, on the National Forum organised by Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF), and the ensuing national roundtable with access officers, reinforced many of the current key issues.

Forum participants included Traveller students – current, prospective, and graduates – and members of Traveller organisations nationwide. They stressed that transfer to higher education cannot be disaggregated from transfer to and progression within other education levels; and that diversity within the Traveller student population (e.g., women, mature, and part-time students) needs to be understood and nurtured.

“ **Access to higher education demands successful completion of preschool, primary, and post-primary stages...** ”

They outlined the additional Covid-19-prompted alienation and racism, loss of confidence, and concerns about returning to campus for Traveller students. They stressed issues such as the need for immediate direct support for transferring and progressing students, additional financial support, IT equipment and WIFI access, and safe study spaces.

Immediate action with appropriate additional resources is required from both education departments if Covid-19's impact is not to reverse the modest gains of recent years, obliterate the aspirations set in the DES/HEA 2018 NAP and DES 2019 TAP, and lose an education generation.

The Forum was followed by a roundtable discussion with higher education institution (HEI) access officers nationwide, to consider and respond to its report. Closely reflecting themes identified in the Forum, speakers called for action on key areas requiring change, including:

- Dependence on pilot initiatives to promote inclusion, rather than systematic departmental and institutional commitments with timelines, targets, and monitoring.
- Direct and indirect discrimination and racism in education, whether by intent or in effect, needs to be named and addressed as an issue for all in HEIs and education at any level.
- Initial and ongoing anti-racism education for all staff and students, including explicit focus on anti-Traveller racism, and ongoing monitoring of its elimination.
- Associated recognition of power, privilege, and cultural gaps between Travellers and educators, mainstream students, and support services.

The difficult but clear message from the Forum is that all, including committed HEI staffs, need to recognise and continuously address power, privilege, and cultural gaps embedded in their positions, and to develop equal partnerships with Traveller community organisations. All need to understand, reinforce, articulate, and highlight the urgency of the situation and the benefits of Travellers' successful engagement in higher education for society. The roundtable endorsed the need for partnerships between HEIs and Traveller organisations, in order to develop effective Traveller inclusion strategies by each HEI.

This two-part initiative underlined that, foundational to the issues raised above, transition to a rights-based approach is essential in Traveller education, including in higher education.

Concluding comments

Covid-19 has exacerbated Travellers' marginalisation in higher education, reinforcing the immediate need for more and stronger mitigating measures. Recent times have also shown the parallels between Travellers' experiences of racism – institutional and individual, conscious and unconscious – and those articulated so clearly by Black Lives Matter participants.

Traveller organisations and other concerned stakeholders highlight key challenges for maintaining enhanced Traveller education access, participation, and outcomes. Partnership requires a rights-based approach to higher education which seeks collective progress as well as individual outcomes, and engages partner Traveller organisations – with parity of esteem – in the design and delivery of institution-wide initiatives towards this end, undertaking the anti-racism education essential to its realisation.

Maynooth University initiatives from 1985 (mentioned above) which proactively support Traveller inclusion and right to education, and recognise their discrimination: these are among the possibilities that can be built on.

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Project to explore Traveller Women's Sense of Identity

An exhibition featuring the unique customs of Traveller women and girls in relation to their hair was held in Linenhall Arts Centre Gallery, Castlebar, Co Mayo, during the month of October 2020.

The *Crown lakeen* Exhibition in Castlebar was presented in tandem with its sister exhibition *Crown beoir*, which took place concurrently at the National Museum of Ireland Country Life, Turlough Parke, Co Mayo.

The exhibitions were a celebration of Traveller/Mincéir girls, their aesthetic expression, and their unique culture. The names *Crown lakeen* and *Crown beoir* are drawn from the Traveller language Cant, with *lakeen* meaning girl, and *beoir* meaning woman.

The exhibitions were part of a larger project, originated by Artist Breda Mayock, titled *Crown – Hair and Identity*. The Crown project focuses on Traveller women and girls, and aims to explore their sense of identity and the physical manifestation of this in their hairstyles and rituals.

Speaking of her remarkable venture Breda Mayock said:

"Exploring hair with Traveller women is an opportunity to celebrate Travellers and Traveller culture.

"Hair is an intensely private matter but it is also a form of self-expression that is publicly visible. It can convey how we want to be seen, and help determine how we are seen.

"The next step for *Crown* is to enable the voices of Traveller women and girls to be heard, to understand their need to be heard, to learn about their experiences in their own words, to encounter their art-making and to listen to their dreams for the future."

The Crown project is funded by Creative Ireland and supported by Mayo Council Arts Service.



Artist & musician
Breda Mayock



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

The National University of Ireland is a federal University with almost 400,000 graduates across the world.

At the centre of the federal university, NUI acts as a forum for its member institutions, provides services to them and manages the central registers and archives of the University.

As a national institution, NUI undertakes a wide range of activities in pursuit of its strategic goals which include the following:

- ▶ Supporting Irish Higher Education and advocating for its advancement at home and abroad
- ▶ Developing and capitalising on the NUI brand nationally and internationally, for the benefit of members and the wider sector
- ▶ Promoting scholarship, research and academic publishing
- ▶ Making a meaningful contribution to Irish civic society.



NUI Constituent Universities Na Comh-Ollscoileanna



University College Dublin
An Coláiste Ollscoile,
Baile Átha Cliath



University College Cork
Coláiste na hOllscoile,
Corcaigh



Maynooth University
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad



National University of Ireland, Galway Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh
(including **Shannon College of Hotel Management** Coláiste Ósta na Sionainne)



NUI Recognised Colleges Coláistí Aitheanta OÉ



RCSI
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Coláiste Ríoga na Máinleá in Éirinn



IPA
Institute of Public Administration
An Foras Riaracháin

Colleges Linked with Constituent Universities Coláistí Ceangailte leis na Comh-Ollscoileanna



Burren College of Art Coláiste Ealaíne na Boirne (NUI, Galway)



Institute of Banking An Institiúid Baincúireachta (UCD)



St Angela's College, Sligo Coláiste San Aingeal, Sligeach (NUI, Galway)



National College of Art and Design Coláiste Náisiúnta Ealaíne is Deartha (UCD)

This article looks at what kind of research is being carried out at present and what ethical issues need to be considered in doing research in a pandemic. It focuses on the interview as a method of data collection and the inherent challenges that Covid-19 presents for researchers.

On 12 March 2020, when all educational institutions closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the pause button was pressed for many research projects because face-to-face fieldwork was no longer possible. Researchers had to reset and rethink their research designs and approaches. The formal learning environment at all levels was transformed overnight, moving out of classrooms, lecture halls, and other such settings to a home-based, online space, a new and potentially very challenging experience for learners, teachers, parents, and others.

Many questions were being asked: What will this mean for education and the experience of learning and teaching at all levels? What will it mean for the role of the teacher, the student, the parent or caregiver, the policymaker, the lecturer, the leader, boards of management, and the communities who were impacted? How will it affect individuals? How will structural inequality play out in this new space? Policymakers were grappling with how to react. This dynamic situation has provided a vital and unprecedented space for education researchers to explore, examine, and evaluate the educational impacts of the pandemic.

All social and educational research has an ethical dimension and can be fraught with challenges at the best of times. Undertaking research in educational settings during a global pandemic presents additional issues in data collection, such as participant recruitment, informed consent, data management and storage, and balancing burdens and benefits. Research ethics should be at the forefront of every study undertaken at this time, in order to protect the health of participants, researchers, and wider communities and to ensure that our research is relevant and contributes to understanding these complex contexts.

Social Research Ethics Committees (SREC) review research projects that involve human participants and personally identifiable information about human beings to ensure that the proposed research is ethically sound and does not present any risk of harm to participants. In Maynooth

Ethical Challenges in Educational Research during the Pandemic

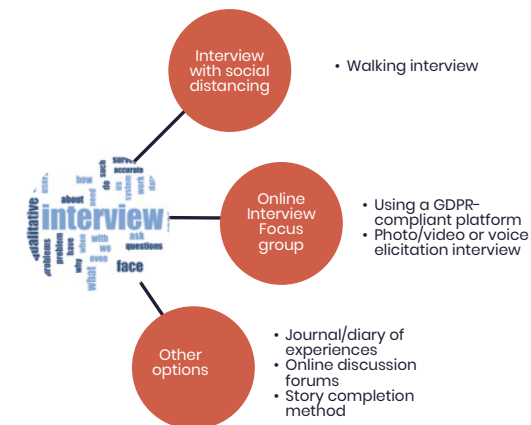
Implications for interviewing in the online environment



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Alternatives to face-to-face interviews and focus groups

University we saw a surge of applications during the past six months for new research and amendments to planned projects.

To begin, we will present some general ethical issues and then look at what kinds of research are being carried out at present, with particular focus on the interview as a method of data collection.

Researching during a pandemic

Kiely and Heavin (2020) coined the term 'covidata' to describe the insatiable need and demand for data being driven by the pandemic. This demand is causing fatigue for some participants, who face repeated requests to participate in research (Dempsey and Burke, 2020). Participants' environments have changed, and it is important to consider that some may be suffering health anxiety, may be ill or have been ill in recent weeks, may be looking after loved ones, or may be living in homes where they do not have control over their own privacy.

Darmody, Smyth, and Russell (2020) list over twenty-two published reports up to July 2020 of Covid-19-related research from primary and second-level education. Research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research, and academic freedom (BERA, 2018). This ethic of respect needs to be kept to the forefront in a time of intense research activity; researchers must be mindful that all social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm, and at a time like this we should focus on reciprocity in our research. For some, having their voice heard is important and can be beneficial for participants.

The big change for researchers was in completing fieldwork. This was not possible to do face-to-face during lockdown. The move to online data collection presented many challenges, such as identifying potential participants, access and making contact, informed consent, confidentiality, and duty of care. It also provided opportunities to explore more creative ways to work with participants.

Fieldwork in the online environment

Qualitative research is intimate because there is little distance between the researchers and their study participants. Covid-19 has meant that this distance is now less than intimate. It has required a change to how we carry out fieldwork. The diagram presents some options that researchers are using in place of face-to-face interviews and observation.

Some educational researchers who cannot visit classrooms on site due to Covid-19 restrictions have opted to use video recording. The same issues of confidentiality exist in the online

space, with some additional issues of where the videos will be stored and where personal images may be used. Others have opted to carry out audio-recorded walking interviews, where a two-metre distance can be maintained.

Another method involves asking participants to use a camera or voice recording app (often on their smartphone) to take photos, make videos, or voice memos about their everyday practices and interactions that they can then share with the researchers in response to questions or prompts. In this instance one must guard against taking any images or sound files that include participants who have not given consent to be in the research. It is imperative to password-protect all data, transfer it to an encrypted device, and to remember not to share paper copies, pens, and so on.

Informed consent and interviewing online

It is normally expected that participants' voluntary informed consent is obtained at the start of the study, and that researchers will remain sensitive and open to the possibility that participants may wish to withdraw their consent for any reason and at any time (BERA, 2018). These principles apply to children and young people as well as to adults.

Researchers using online interviews need to negotiate informed consent in this space. It is important to consider the multiple layers of consent that might be needed, such as parental and teacher consent, young people's assent, and the potential gate-keeping role of the school principal or board of management in providing access to participants. A photographed or scanned signed consent sheet can be used.

“ The move to online data collection presented many challenges... it also provided opportunities to explore more creative ways to work.”

Researchers should do everything they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they can, what is involved in a study. They should be told why their participation is necessary, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to the information they provide, how that information will be used, and how and to whom it will be reported. They also should be informed about the retention, sharing, and any possible secondary uses of the research data.

Equally, from an ethical perspective, researchers need to consider if participants might experience any distress as a result of their participation. Giving potential participants an indication of the sorts of questions they might be asked can help them decide if they want to participate. Consider whether you need to provide an appropriate point of referral in case of distress, such as a guidance counsellor for students. This information can be provided on an information sheet sent to the participants and should be in language appropriate to the person's developmental level.

Confidentiality

Subject to the requirements of legislation, including the Data Protection Act (2018) and the Freedom of Information Act (2014), researchers should protect the confidentiality of research participants. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that participants understand the extent of

anonymity and confidentiality offered at all stages of the research, from data gathering to dissemination. Participants should be apprised of the limits of confidentiality.

The device on which the interview will be recorded needs to be secure and password-protected. If conducting interviews on platforms such as Teams or Zoom, it is important that both the researcher and the participant ensure they are in a private room, where their interview cannot be compromised by a third party listening in.

Communicating your research findings

Researchers have a responsibility to discern the most relevant and useful ways of informing participants about the outcomes of the research in which they were or are involved. In the spirit of openness, this means we need to think about reporting our research through the channels people use, including online media, virtual convenings, and academic papers. As we respond to and recover from this pandemic, it is important that our research be part of the solution and augment people's lived experiences.

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Professor Dan Bradley wins ERC Advanced Grant



Dan Bradley, Professor of population genetics at Trinity College Dublin, was awarded a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant in March 2020. This is second award secured by Prof Bradley.

He will use the grant to pursue ground-breaking inter-disciplinary research in the field of ancient epigenetics that will help write new chapters of ancient human history.

A strong culture of quality that promotes sustainable stakeholder engagement ultimately underpins quality resilience, that is, the ability of our quality frameworks to support dynamic environments in times of challenge and uncertainty. This article suggests areas for providers to focus on as they continue to develop the capacity of their QA frameworks to support the delivery of blended learning.

All higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, to ensure a consistent learning experience for students, are required to set out quality standards that align with requirements by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Irish quality assurance (QA) agency, and ultimately with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for QA (ENQA, 2015). This article discusses the nature of QA frameworks as a complex area requiring strategic direction. It discusses the Higher Education Colleges' Association (HECA) members' experience of developing enabling quality culture through re-engagement with QQI. Finally, it reflects on the journey of HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) towards creating enabling QA frameworks for blended learning.

QA is a 'wicked issue'

The complex nature of quality frameworks and diverse applications of policies and procedures in higher education align with many of the characteristics of 'wicked policy issues'. These are issues that do not fit our mould of existing experience and are by nature unpredictable and difficult to resolve (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Characteristics of wicked policy issues include the involvement of multiple stakeholders with different values and priorities and the absence of one 'right answer'. Because policies are applied in multiple contexts where no two situations are ever the same, there is no exhaustible list of solutions to matters arising, as the list of alternative scenarios that could arise in the education environment is endless.

The wicked nature of QA means that the development of quality culture requires a wicked strategy (Camillus, 2008) that promotes sustainable stakeholder engagement and is adaptable in complex, changeable situations. We posit that a strong quality culture is required for the effective implementation of quality frameworks, and that this ultimately underpins quality resilience: the ability of our quality frameworks to support dynamic environments in times of challenge and uncertainty.

Developing Enabling QA Frameworks for Blended Learning



Ruth Ní Bheoláin

Chair, HAQEF; QA Officer, Hibernia College



Ronnie Harrison

Vice Chair, HAQEF; Head of Quality and Academic Affairs, Open Training College

Developing an enabling quality culture through re-engagement with QQI

Broadly speaking, quality assurance can be thought of on a continuum that begins with putting a QA framework in place that ensures accountability and that ultimately, when implemented effectively, enables transformation and quality enhancement of the learning environment (Lomas, 2004; Elassy, 2015). The European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA, 2015) proposed that the duality of accountability and enhancement can lead to QA whereby internal stakeholders, from students and academic staff to institutional leaders and managers, assume responsibility for quality and engage in QA at all levels of the institution.

The capacity for QA frameworks to both assure accountability and transform the learning environment depends upon that culture. However, negative perceptions of QA in higher education can create barriers to QA's potential to enable quality enhancement (QE). QA is often viewed as a 'burdensome extra' that infringes on academic autonomy and increases bureaucracy (Harvey & Williams, 2010); further issues in quality in higher education can be due to a lack of clarity on ethical standards appropriate to management (Loveluck, 1995).

To challenge this negative perception and to support staff and students to engage with QA, effective communication and authentic engagement are fundamental to the QA role. In this way, it can be seen as a supportive structure that provides consistency to students and staff; that helps us not only to meet regulatory requirements but also to maintain the integrity of, and continually enhance, the learning environment. As it turned out, re-engaging with QQI presented a wicked strategy that promoted quality culture and resilience.

“ At the beginning of 2016, HEIs began the journey towards re-engaging with QQI.

QQI was established in November 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. Under this Act, all HEIs were required to have their QA procedures approved by QQI in a process named 're-engagement'. At the beginning of 2016, HEIs began this journey towards re-engaging with QQI. For private HEIs, the intention of re-engagement was to enable providers to take full ownership of their QA procedures in a more autonomous and sustainable way (QQI, 2016).

Re-engaging with QQI was a significant undertaking for both providers and QQI. Ultimately, it was a reflective process facilitated by external peer-review panels that sought to assess the lived experience of providers' quality culture. This required genuine reflection on, and review of, existing provider QA frameworks to ensure they were fit for purpose and were an accurate representation of practice. Authentic consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, including support staff, administrative staff, academic staff, senior management, and learners, was integral to the process, as well as demonstrating effective QA communication across our institutions. The process also compelled providers to consider the robustness of their QA frameworks in terms of longevity, scalability, and capacity to respond to change and risk in the tertiary education environment.

Throughout the process of re-engagement, the thirteen member colleges of HECA have shared their experiences formally and informally to support their peers across the sector. Additionally, sharing experience and feedback remained a standing agenda item throughout 2018/19 for HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), where enabling QA remains a prominent theme of discussion and has become a formal element of our work plan throughout 2020/21.

HAQEF's journey into enabling QA frameworks for blended learning

HAQEF has established itself as a community of shared practice, peer learning, and peer support over the last two years. HAQEF is composed of representatives of HECA colleges who come from a variety of roles across both QA and teaching- and learning-specific roles, bringing a diverse blend of regulatory and academic perspectives and experiences to the group. Whether in QA or in teaching, learning, and assessment (TLA) roles, members all have a common goal in mind as they work to maintain and enhance a high-quality learning environment for staff and students, who are supported by provider-specific QA frameworks.

Following successful collaboration on the institutional application of the National Forum's Professional Development Framework (National Forum, 2016) throughout 2019/20 (Ní Bheoláin, 2019), HAQEF established its work plan for 2020/21 to include Quality Assurance Enabling Student Success in a Digital World, with a particular focus on QA frameworks that support blending learning delivery, which also presented complex wicked issues for discussion.

HAQEF has established itself as a community of shared practice, peer learning, and peer support over the last two years.

Before the onset of the public health emergency in March 2020, HECA colleges were at different stages of development on the use of blended learning and the QA of such delivery. Some members had re-engaged with QQI on the basis that all programmes from that provider were predicated on blended TLA. Some had differential QA for a limited number of blended learning programmes, while core QA was based on fully face-to-face delivery. Some used a virtual learning environment for mainly repository purposes but did not deliver through a blended model, and some had never needed to engage their students in a virtual learning environment. It was therefore very timely that work in this area had commenced in early 2020.

Initially, members worked together to conduct a gap analysis and to map considerations and guidelines against QQI's core QA criteria (QQI, 2016), in order to identify areas of impact for integrating blending learning into existing QA frameworks. Arising from the vast range of experiences of members and ensuing discussions, we suggest the following areas for additional vigilance for providers as they continue to develop the capacity of their QA frameworks to supported blended learning delivery:

- Ensuring that TLA strategy supports a high-quality learning experience for all students in all teaching delivery modes, by taking specific pedagogical considerations for blending and online learning.
- Renewing focus on academic integrity, ethical considerations, and appropriateness of different modes of assessment, including

the provision of training to enhance assessment, both digital and assessment literacy, for staff and students, to promote engagement and academic integrity.

- Addressing the renewed and pressing need to explore the role of learning analytics and the use of data.
- Being cognisant of legal requirements, including compliance of all elements with data protection, copyright, and jurisdictional issues in the provision of online learning.
- Ensuring appropriate expertise of all staff, including part-time academics and external examiners, through the provision of ongoing professional development activities.
- Clear communication of structures for mitigating disadvantage and how procedures for reasonable accommodation can be used by learners who are experiencing any type of disadvantage.
- Renewing QA processes for completing online governance and assessment-related procedures, including online grading, online moderation, and conducting online examination boards, and considering the adaptability of both technical and QA approval systems to cope with change.
- Renewing the importance of peer learning and feedback, and of involvement with broader sectoral bodies, networks, and associations, as well as continuing the focus on national and international – particularly European – developments on the quality-assuring of blended and online delivery, such as QQI's topic-specific statutory guidelines for blended learning (QQI, 2018), ACODE (2014), EADTU (2007), and Quality Matters (2018).

In considering any development to QA frameworks, we urge QA professionals to lean on QA culture in collaboration with diverse audiences to ensure that ongoing development is robust, authentic, and fit for purpose across the tertiary education sector.

To 2020/21 and beyond

HAQEF will continue with its focus in this area of creating enabling blended learning QA frameworks throughout 2020/21, with planned activities including seminars, a colloquium workshop series, and the development of resources. Contemporaneous survey results and feedback published by the National Forum, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), and QQI (in particular) are fully considered during this ongoing collaborative work. We are continually grateful for the engagement of various bodies such the National Forum, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), QQI, and many individuals for their contributions and engagement.

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Prof Anna Davies wins ERC Public Engagement with Research Award for social media outreach

Anna Davies is the winner of the inaugural European Research Council Public Engagement with Research Award for social media-led engagement around the ShareCity project. Anna is Professor of Geography, Environment and Society in the School of Natural Sciences at Trinity College Dublin.



The ShareCity team, led by Professor Davies, is transforming cities onto more sustainable pathways by developing deeper theoretical understanding of contemporary food sharing; generating comparative international data about food sharing activities within cities; assessing the impact of food sharing activities; and exploring how food sharing in cities might evolve in the future.

"Public engagement has been crucial to the SHARECITY project and it has been a team effort throughout our research," Professor Anna Davies said.

"It has enriched our findings significantly and I would encourage all researchers to explore opportunities to enhance their public engagement and create science for the public good."

Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2020

A summary of the findings

Almost 45,000 third-level students took part in this year's Irish Survey of Student Engagement. The survey report, published in November 2020, provides a timely snapshot of student experiences immediately before the sweeping changes introduced as a result of Covid-19. This article presents the main findings of the survey.

Introduction

In February and March 2020, almost 45,000 students in twenty-six higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland took part in StudentSurvey.ie, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, or Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn. Participants included first-year and final-year undergraduates and students on taught postgraduate programmes.

StudentSurvey.ie focuses on student engagement, which it describes as 'the amount of time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them'.

Participation in StudentSurvey.ie 2020, the survey's eighth year, was the highest to date, at 44,707, lending considerable quantitative weight to the findings. These include the following:

- 44% of all respondents said their experience at their HEI contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in being an informed and active citizen.
- 56% tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how something looks from their perspective.
- 71% felt that lecturers/teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements.
- 58% said their HEI emphasised providing support to help students succeed academically.
- 51% said their HEI emphasised providing support for their overall well-being – via recreation, health care, counselling, etc.
- 41% blended academic learning with workplace experience.
- 49% prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students.
- 41% said the quality of interactions with academic staff was excellent.
- 80% would describe their entire educational experience at their HEI as good or excellent.

Education Matters
based on materials
provided by
StudentSurvey.ie

What is StudentSurvey.ie?

StudentSurvey.ie is a nationwide survey that asks students about their experiences of higher education. It is a collaborative partnership sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The survey responses provide useful information for HEIs to identify and build on good practice and to become aware of and address problems or challenges for students. The findings can therefore be of great use and benefit to both students and HEIs and can also inform national policy.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement was introduced in 2013, based on the Australia and New Zealand model (itself based on the US model). It was the first national survey of its kind in Europe. Similar surveys have since been launched in other European countries. Almost 250,000 students have taken part in the Irish survey in the eight years to date.

Fieldwork for 2021 is scheduled, as usual, for February–March. The results will provide a valuable point of comparison with the experiences of students in this current year of unprecedented upheaval. With everyone still coming to terms with the myriad effects of the pandemic, students' personal reports of their experiences and how they were supported are more important than ever.

Taking place in the same period next year will be the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students, or PGR StudentSurvey.ie (Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn do Mhic Léinn Taighde Iarchéime). This survey, which occurs every two years, will invite participation from all PhD and master's by research students in participating HEIs.

“The Irish Survey of Student Engagement was introduced in 2013 and was the first national survey of its kind in Europe.

Pandemic disruption

When reviewing the StudentSurvey.ie 2020 results, it is important to keep in mind that students were answering questions before Covid-19 had made a serious impact on Ireland's social, political, and educational life. By the time restrictions were implemented, and the major shift to online learning began, most of the participating HEIs had already completed their fieldwork for the survey.

In the months since, students have seen untold disruption to what was a relatively stable system before Covid-19. First years in particular, who started third-level education in the 2020–21 academic year, have had a vastly different experience from their predecessors. The effect on campus owing to public health measures and restrictions is expected to be greatest for this cohort, most of whom have not experienced higher education before.

A chapter in this year's StudentSurvey.ie National Report explored first years' experiences in Irish higher education in the past three years. The aim is to create a baseline for future comparison, for example with next year's data on aspects of on-campus experience, such as interaction with staff

and other students, and support for students' academic, civic, and social engagement.

Any such comparison must allow for the measures being taken by HEIs to implement or ramp up remote or blended alternatives to on-site learning. Future years of StudentSurvey.ie feedback will form part of an invaluable and growing data set with which to examine trends in student experience, be they full-time, part-time, or remote students.

Survey findings

In the 2020 survey, full-time students reported much higher scores than part-time or remote students on the extent to which they collaborate with peers, their perceived relationship with academic staff, and their perceptions of how much their HEI emphasises services and activities that support their learning and development.

For example, 39% of remote students said they never worked collaboratively with other students, compared with 21% of part-time and just 8% of full-time students. Collaborating in preparation for exams saw a similar pattern: 35% of remote students, 24% of part-time and 16% of full-time students said they never did this. On whether their HEI provided social opportunities, 63% of full-time students said 'quite a bit' or 'very much', compared with 39% of part-time and 32% of remote students.

A different pattern was found in the perceived quality of interactions with others on campus: 36% of part-time respondents said they would rate their interactions with academic staff as excellent, followed by 26% of remote and 18% of full-time students. Interactions with other students were described as excellent by 43% of part-time, 34% of full-time, and 28% of remote students.

Survey questions are grouped within nine broad indicators: higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, quantitative reasoning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, effective teaching practices, quality of interactions, and supportive environment.

Additional questions relate less directly to these indicators but contribute to a broader understanding of student engagement. Findings from these questions include:

- 64% often or very often improved knowledge and skills that will contribute to their employability.
- 46% often or very often explored how to apply their learning in the workplace.
- 40% often or very often exercised or participated in physical fitness activities.
- 46% plan to do, have done, or were doing community service or volunteer work.
- 80% would evaluate their entire educational experience at their HEI as good or excellent.

“In the 2020 survey, full-time students reported much higher scores than part-time or remote students on the extent to which they collaborate with peers, their perceived relationship with academic staff...

- 84%, if they could start over again, would probably or definitely go to the same HEI.

Students were also asked to what extent their HEI experience contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in various areas. They said it contributed 'quite a bit' or 'very much' to their ability to write clearly and effectively (56%), speak clearly and effectively (54%), think critically and analytically (75%), work effectively with others (68%), solve complex real-world problems (52%), and be an informed and active citizen at societal, political, or community level (44%).

Survey significance

Dr Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha, project manager of StudentSurvey.ie, commented on the significance of the survey findings:

The value of the results of StudentSurvey.ie for 2020 is twofold. Firstly, as in previous years, the results provide insightful feedback from students about wide-ranging aspects of their experience, which institutions can use to understand and improve the student experience and to measure the impact of recent interventions. Secondly, and uniquely against the current backdrop, the results also provide us with a national and broad baseline of 44,707 students before their experience changed dramatically. The StudentSurvey.ie National Report 2020 presents these baseline data, and the same questions will be returned to in 2021 to evaluate the impact of the responses to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis on the cohort whose experience of student life is anticipated to be changed most fundamentally – first-year undergraduate students.

StudentSurvey.ie enables students to give direct, self-reported feedback on their levels of engagement and satisfaction with HEIs' policies and practices. From the HEIs' point of view, the survey helps to identify good practice and areas for improvement, serves as a guide for continual enhancement, and allows year-on-year comparison of key performance indicators, both internally and internationally.

“ StudentSurvey.ie enables students to give direct, self-reported feedback on their levels of engagement and satisfaction with HEIs' policies and practices.”

StudentSurvey.ie launched its National Report at an online conference in November, 'Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement', organised in tandem with Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the National Student Engagement Programme. The survey, accordingly, serves to empower students and strengthen partnerships at third level. Given the severe disruption that currently prevails, these qualities have never been more timely or important.

“ I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.”

– Ernest Hemingway

New Elective in Black Studies announced by Trinity College



From Dr Clodagh Brook, Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion with Assistant Professor Dr Philomena Mullen, who will lead the new Elective in Black Studies in 2021.

IT Sligo Student wins Irish Design Graduate Award



Jasmine Lee, final year student at the Yeats Academy of Arts Design & Architecture at IT Sligo, is the winner of a national award for her design concept of repurposing Sligo Gaol as a boutique hotel.

The 2020 Awards attracted almost 600 entries from graduates around the country.

"This is definitely a new milestone for me!" Jasmine said.

"I thank everyone from the bottom of my heart for the encouragement I have received, and my sincerest appreciation to my lecturers, who have guided throughout the project.

"One of the many advantages of Interior Architecture is the opportunity to work with real clients and community projects, participate in international design competitions, and liaise with design professionals throughout the course."



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Research⁶

One of the boldest deep-ocean research projects ever undertaken in Europe

In May 2020, Dr Sergei Lebedev, seismologist at Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, led a 3-week expedition on board the RV Celtic Explorer, to retrieve state-of-the-art ocean bottom seismometers which had been deployed offshore to the west of Ireland in 2018 as part of the SEA-SEIS project (Structure, Evolution and Seismicity of the Irish offshore).

The key information recovered in the summer of 2020 provided new insights into earthquakes off the Irish coast, the potential for enhanced tsunami warning systems, and the migration patterns of North Atlantic whales.



Overview of Research



Peter Brown
Director, Irish
Research Council

The research system experienced huge disruption and challenges in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 but came through the year demonstrating its importance and value as a strategic national resource. The establishment of a new government department combining tertiary education and research broke new ground. This overview summarises key developments in research, drawing on the contributions in this year's chapter.

Introduction

I'm delighted to introduce the research chapter in this year's edition of *Ireland's Yearbook of Education* by Education Matters.

It is fair to say that the year in research has been dominated by two developments: the formation of a new department with responsibility for tertiary education and research, and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has created unprecedented global disruption and challenges. I shall return to these themes shortly, but not before highlighting some other significant developments.

The Irish Research Council (IRC) launched its Strategic Plan 2020–2024 early in the year, and although Covid-19 was not yet on the national radar, the plan's emphasis on the development of expertise and excellent researchers across all disciplines means it remains as relevant in the 'new normal' as it did under the old. As well as beginnings, the year also marked some endings and the anticipation of next steps. Innovation 2020, the national R&D strategy, entered its final year of implementation, as did Horizon 2020.

New department, new start

2020 heralded the creation of a new department that many stakeholders had been seeking for some time. After the new government was formed, it created the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, combining elements of the previous Department of Education and Skills and Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The move was widely welcomed in the research ecosystem on the basis that such a new department would give added impetus to the promotion of research and innovation, and the institutions that perform it, as key to Ireland's future. Dr Lisa Keating discusses the emergence of the new Department in her contribution to this chapter.

The new Minister, Simon Harris TD, was quick to reflect the importance of expertise and research

in informing evidence-based decisions and strategy in confronting the Covid-19 crisis. It's fair to say that the research ecosystem is enjoying a higher profile politically, and indeed in the public realm, via the Minister's active social media and other communications. The Council chair and senior staff had an extremely engaging first meeting with the Minister, after which he tweeted:

Thank you to @IrishResearch for meeting with me today. Brilliant discussion about power of research to transform our country economically & socially & opportunities of new Department to drive this agenda, develop a new national plan for research. Will need investment & focus.

Roll on a few months, and Simon Harris's vision for the new Department had begun to take shape. In a keynote address at the Irish Universities Association (IUA) seminar on the role of universities for future skills and innovation, the Minister identified four pillars that would underpin the strategy of the Department: innovation, talent, internationalisation, and inclusion. Judging by the reaction on Twitter, these themes gained immediate traction and buy-in from around the system.

The IUA seminar also featured a hugely insightful presentation from Mike Beary, country director from Amazon Web Services, in which he spoke of the value of critical thinking to the business, and a belief that technology settings need to include 'non-tech' people from disciplines such as the humanities to enable critical appraisal.

“ **Technology settings need to include 'non-tech' people from disciplines such as the humanities to enable critical appraisal.** ”

€29 million was secured by the Minister under Budget 2021 (in addition to funding for higher education and research in 2020; see below), to be invested to support researchers, build capacity, support Covid-19 research, and strengthen north-south research links. The review of the National Development Plan ('Review to Renew') will inform the evolution of investment for the longer term in higher education and research and across government.

Covid-19 and enhanced collaboration

Research and innovation, like all other sectors, were seriously disrupted by Covid-19. But there is a strong sense that we have yet to quantify how variables like gender, disability, and the stage of a research career have impacted on individuals. Professor Anita Maguire reflects on early-career researchers in her contribution to the chapter. There is no doubt that the crisis has hit hard on some early-career researchers, particularly PhD candidates, whose projects were thrown into disarray by the shutdown of labs, archives, and other essential facilities.

The crisis will also generate new learnings and novel ways of working to take forward. The research system, including enterprise partners, demonstrated its value as a strategic national resource, providing expertise, facilities, and skilled personnel to help in the fight against the pandemic.

It has been a year of pulling together in the face of adversity – within individual teams and organisations, but also across organisations and

agencies. Collaboration between Ireland's research funders in response to the crisis has been very strong and continues to evolve. At an early stage, the Irish Research Council, Health Research Board (HRB), and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) issued a joint statement designed to provide reassurance to the research community and to signal that flexibility would be the order of the day in how the agencies would work with awardees to navigate through the disruption.

Collaboration then moved up a gear in the form of rapid-response research calls, involving an IRC-HRB partnership and a partnership between SFI, Enterprise Ireland (EI), and the Investment Development Agency (IDA). It is an initiative of which the agencies can be collectively proud, considering the speed and agility shown in running the processes from conception to announcement of awards. So far, close to eighty projects have been approved, with a combined investment of €12 million.

At the time of writing, it is likely that further support for rapid-response research will be forthcoming before the end of 2020. The Covid-19 crisis has focused research funders on enhanced collaboration, and this will continue beyond the far side of this crisis.

“ **Collaboration between Ireland's research funders in response to the crisis has been very strong and continues to evolve.** ”

Research data – its management, availability, and use – is of major importance, and the pandemic provides a more-than-ample case study in this regard. As well as rapid-response research funding initiatives, research funders, including the European Commission, have taken steps to initiate and support accelerated measures to make data and evidence available that helps in the fight against Covid-19. Dr Patricia Clarke of the HRB provides a very useful update in this chapter on new initiatives in research data management.

Early in the crisis, the Irish Research Council decided to implement a request scheme for costed extensions on a case-by-case basis, with priority being given to early-career researchers finishing in the near term. This decision reflected the fact that the sizeable majority of the Council's awards are individual grants made to postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers. Scope for budget re-allocations, as would typically apply to large grants, is not a realistic option for smaller individual early-career awards.

After the new government was formed, and in recognition of the disruption to the research and innovation system caused by the pandemic, a very welcome fund of €47 million was made available to higher education institutions via the Higher Education Authority. This fund will be critical in ensuring that postgraduate and contract researchers will be supported in finishing out current projects and in transitioning to the next steps in their research trajectories. The alternative to this was the spectre of a research cohort with advanced knowledge and skills, people who are key to the future of research and innovation in its widest sense, being potentially cut adrift from the system.

Research, policy, and strategy

The interplay of research, policy, and policymakers, and how this circle can be made virtuous, is again a significant theme in this year's research chapter. Mary Doyle, former senior civil servant, and Professor Sean Redmond of the University of Limerick explore this in their articles. The chapter also features contributions specifically addressing research for education policy.

Linking the research community and expertise with government departments and agencies, to enable evidence-based policymaking and decisions, is a key pillar of the Irish Research Council's strategic plan. The Council aims to support knowledge exchange and cross-fertilisation through both programmes and collaborative initiatives.

Programmes include New Foundations, COALESCE, and our ongoing postgraduate partnership schemes. Exposure of early-career researchers to the research-policy interface is important, as the system is training researchers for careers in the public and other 'external' sectors as well as in academia. The 2020 New Foundations programme greatly expanded its partnership strands, to include agencies such as Creative Ireland and the Department of Justice.

The Council is pleased to have opened the third COALESCE call in Q4 2020, with partners this year including the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. This year the COALESCE call includes an open interdisciplinary strand linked with national or global societal challenges. Beyond the pre-existing frameworks, namely Project Ireland National Strategic Outcomes and the Sustainable Development Goals, the context for the call has broadened to include the obvious Covid-19 challenge, the themes identified by government as it develops the National Economic Plan (not least Brexit), and the Shared Island initiative. The Council looks forward to supporting excellent interdisciplinary research projects with strong policy linkages under COALESCE 2020.

Looking at collaborative initiatives, a second phase of work on Engaged Research, led by Campus Engage, has been completed under a partnership with the Council. Together with other research funders, we are looking forward to working with Campus Engage to develop further measures that bring about a widely engaged research system across disciplines and regions. In addition, the Council is pleased to be supporting a new Public and Patient Involvement network, led by the HRB. Engaged research, impact, and knowledge exchange are all closely related, and this year's chapter has excellent contributions from Liam Cleere of UCD and Dr Alison Campbell of Knowledge Transfer Ireland.

Engaging policymakers in developing the effectiveness of the interface between researchers and policy is a priority under an exciting new partnership with the Royal Irish Academy. A Research for Public Policy initiative will launch a number of seminars to consider what kind of architecture is needed in Ireland to cultivate a dynamic ecosystem for researchers and policymakers to work together.

“ **Linking the research community with government departments and agencies, to enable evidence-based policymaking and decisions, is a key pillar of the Irish Research Council's strategic plan.** ”

This broad theme – that the research system is not simply the concern of one government department but in fact is a resource for and informed by the whole of government – will be a key driver for the next national strategy for research and innovation. The Council looks forward to engaging with the Department on the development of the new strategy, and to playing a key role in the ecosystem in its implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank, on behalf of everyone involved in Education Matters, all the contributors to the research chapter. They have collectively provided much food for thought as we look towards 2021. It has been a year of immense challenges, but also a year in which the contribution of research and expertise has been particularly apparent.

The prospect of a vaccine on the horizon is cause for optimism, but at the same time it is clear that we have yet to grasp the full human cost of the pandemic. To look at the virus as an isolated incident and not further evidence of the broader impact of humanity's encroachment on and exploitation of the natural world would be myopic. Our greatest challenges lie ahead of us, and research and innovation will be more important than ever in successfully overcoming them.

Strawberry moon over Dunsink

A picture by Anthony Lynch of the full Strawberry moon rising over Dunsink Observatory in Dublin, June 2020.

Multiple shots stacked from a time stamp to show the change in colour and height as the moon rose that night.



As we emerge from the last financial crisis, we need to think once again about how best to foster research in this country. The best way to do this is to rebalance funding towards individual researchers and back basic or fundamental research.

A frequent question among my peers when I was a PhD student many years ago was; “Are you going to go into academia or industry?” The question assumed this was a binary choice and the two options were mutually exclusive pursuits. The question also revealed the clear need in the 1990s for academia and industry to work more collaboratively together and to understand each other’s language, objectives and approaches for the benefit of both.

Of course, this division has never been clear cut. To bring some of the greatest revolutionary advances of the 19th and 20th Century from an idea to widespread use, academics and business people have often collaborated. Just ask Donegal-born Nobel prize winner Bill Campbell who developed the cure to river blindness together with MSD.

However, there was a policy shift in recent decades to ensure that research and business could work better together. Throughout the mid-2000s Ireland, and many other countries around the globe, directed considerable effort into supports and structures that made the exchange of knowledge and expertise between these two sectors easier.

Enterprise Ireland programmes such as the Commercialisation Fund and Innovation Partnerships aimed to bridge the gap between fundamental / discovery research and industrial investment by supporting researchers to identify and develop the elements of their research that could be taken forward to the market either by the research team itself through a spinout company or by licensing the technology to an already established company. The Technology Transfer Strengthening Initiative developed a professional technology transfer system across Ireland’s public research institutions through the establishment of on-site Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs). Knowledge Transfer Ireland (KTI) was set up to act as the central point of reference for industry-academia partnership and research commercialization, encouraging predictability

We Need to Talk About Research

Is it time to rethink how we fund research in Ireland?



Lisa Keating
Director of Research and Innovation,
Irish Universities Association

and transparency across the Irish knowledge transfer system through the provision of tailored guidance.

At the same time, the research base was supported by unprecedented Government investment to build a world-class research capability within our public research system. Already in place were the two forebears of the Irish Research Council: led by our current Taoiseach Michael Martin TD, IRCHSS was established in 1999, with IRCSET following in 2001. The Technology Foresight Fund, administered through the newly formed Science Foundation Ireland, invested the equivalent of €646m under the National Development Plan 2000–2006. Under the subsequent Strategy for Science, Technology & Innovation, Government research and development budgets rose to an all-time high of €930m in 2008. In parallel, the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTL) channeled significant investment into physical infrastructure, equipment and human resources, totaling €1.2bn over its five cycles from 2000–2015. A transformation was taking place across Ireland’s research system, with strategic investment in research excellence and high-quality facilities positioning Ireland on the global stage.

Despite enormous pressures of the Exchequer, when the financial crisis hit the Irish economy, the Government’s investment in research and development remained constant at approximately 1% of all government expenditure. The focus of that investment shifted however to address the immediate economic needs of the country. Even in the funding of discovery research there was an emphasis on a more immediate return on investment – the money simply wasn’t there to plan too far into an uncertain future. Because of the Government’s foresight to invest strongly and broadly in the research base in the preceding years, Ireland was able to harness this progress to emerge strong from the economic downturn.

“ By the time the economic crisis had passed, it was clear that higher education research was a key enabler of the Irish economy.”

By the time the economic crisis had passed, it was clear that higher education research was a key enabler of the Irish economy. Over the years metrics were developed to demonstrate its value beyond doubt – being able to quantify patents, licences, spin-out companies, jobs created, collaborative projects with industry, industry investment leveraged, new products and services launched.

As research underpinned the economic recovery, there was an unintended consequence. The great value of research to broader societal needs was no longer discussed or understood. Research that gives rise to a cure for a disease, or a public policy that improves the lives of citizens, or a practice that curtails global warming rarely delivers such transformation within a short-time frame with predefined measurable outputs to track its impact. Such research is more nuanced, interdependent, multifaceted and long-term but it is the basis for disruptive innovation down the line and the life-changing advances witnessed in everyday life, from medical treatments to personal entertainment. Slowly, we forgot about the importance of fundamental research in our eagerness to exploit the immediate opportunities.

The great astronomer Carl Sagan once said; “cutting off fundamental, curiosity-driven research is like eating the seed corn. We may have a little

more to eat next winter but what will we plant so we and our children will have enough to get us through the winters to come?"

The creation earlier this year of the new Government Department for Further, Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science brings together the two critical and interdependent policy areas of higher education and research for the first time. We in Ireland now have an unrivalled opportunity to drive an alignment of policy and the unprecedented opportunity to create the talent pipeline for future jobs and the innovations for tomorrow.

The establishment of the new Department is an explicit recognition in itself of the intrinsic value of research at the heart of a successful higher education system, and as a driver of economic and social development.

The first cabinet minister with the word research in their title will be able to continue to support the needs of the business community but also harness the power of research in many other areas including medicine, the environment, transport, telecommunications and policy.

There is every reason to believe that we are now on the cusp of a new beginning for research where we return to a mixture of industry research complimented by fundamental research by individuals and teams tackling some of the biggest challenges of the day.

The choice is not binary. The two are not mutually exclusive. Research requires both to flourish. The new Department is the opportunity to plant Sagan's seed corn and usher in a new golden age of research in this country.



“The creation of the new Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science brings together the two policy areas of higher education and research for the first time.”

SFI Future Leaders Awards

Dr Caitriona Jackman, of DIAS Astronomy and Astrophysics, has been awarded €1.3m via the SFI President of Ireland Future Research Leaders Award.

Dr Jackman received her award at a special ceremony in Áras an Uachtaráin.

The SFI President of Ireland Future Research Leaders Award recognises outstanding new research leadership and talent.

Research Data – A Rising National Priority

Research data is a valuable national asset, and the management and sharing of research data are among the most pressing challenges facing the higher education and research sectors. The acceptance of data as an important strategic asset in responding to Covid-19 is accompanied by greater awareness of the gaps and outstanding issues. The opportunity for transformation needs to be matched with a strategic choice for investment.

Research data is a valuable national asset, and the management and sharing of research data are among the most pressing challenges facing the higher education and research sectors. In order to unlock the full value of existing and future research data, it is essential that data be stored, managed, accessed, and shared within a robust governance framework that also protects privacy and confidentiality.

Many countries have begun to implement national policies for data produced through publicly funded research.¹ Ireland does not yet have a national policy, but best-practice initiatives are emerging which can inform a coordinated Irish agenda.

Partnerships and practices – a funder approach

One of the most significant drivers to improve research data management and sharing comes from research funders. The Health Research Board (HRB) is developing a supportive and efficient environment for research data by leveraging the expertise of international partners, implementing practical actions, developing policy for health research data, and driving a national discussion.

The HRB has partnered with the International GoFAIR Office to develop common FAIR data stewardship skills and networking among key support staff in Irish research institutions.² (FAIR = Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable.) In September 2020 the HRB hosted an international panel to discuss the data management plans (DMPs) prepared with the support of these trained data stewards, alongside institutional reports on research data management. Issues arising for further clarifications include the defining of budget costs, appropriate use of metadata and citations, data licences choice, data storage processes, and decisions on IP protection versus data sharing.



Patricia Clarke
Programme
Manager – Policy
and EU Funding,
Health Research
Board

The HRB has also partnered with F1000 to develop HRB Open Research,³ an open publishing platform with integrated support for health researchers to implement open data policies alongside published articles. From 2021 this platform will also include the option to publish machine-readable DMPs that are aligned to the FAIR data principles.⁴ This will serve to promote best-practice learning and to credit data stewards and authors, and will enable the mapping and tracking of research outputs that link articles and data.

2019 was a particularly busy year. Following a dedicated funding call on secondary analysis of data, the HRB made seven awards at a total cost of €1.75m.⁵ The HRB also funded a proof-of-concept technical infrastructure project to demonstrate how researchers can be given secure and controlled access to anonymous and linked health and social case datasets in Ireland.

This work builds on an earlier published discussion document,⁶ which presented a Data Access, Storage, Sharing and Linkage (DASSL) model showing types of infrastructure and services required to unlock the significant value of currently underexploited data for the public good. It is being led by the Irish Centre for High-End Computing (ICHEC) at NUI Galway working with researchers at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, and the Health Service Executive (HSE). Further discussion and investment are required to scale up this model to serve national research requirements.

In 2019 the HRB published a new policy on the management and sharing of research.⁷ In line with best international practice,^{8,9} HRB-funded researchers are now required to develop DMPs to consider how data is collected, stored, managed, and shared throughout the lifecycle of their research projects. A HRB digital DMP template, based on Science Europe's 'Practical Guide to the International Alignment of Research Data Management', has been prepared for this purpose.¹⁰

“Data collection and management are accepted as fundamental to Ireland’s efforts to tackle Covid-19.”

The HRB is also learning from excellent resources such as the EU FAIRsFAIR project, which is providing a clear actionable agenda for numerous research data issues.¹¹ It is using expertise from partnerships and initiatives across Europe to help turn the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) into a functioning infrastructure.¹² FAIRsFAIR leaves no doubt on the requirements of different research stakeholders to harmonise mechanisms, strategies, and policy approaches over a sustained period.

Combined, these developments of services, infrastructure, and other resources to support research data management needs and the reuse of secondary data provide a rich picture of the breadth and fast pace of change in a single organisation.

Covid-19 and research data

In Ireland and beyond, the need for more efficient access and processing of data has been brought into sharp focus by the Covid-19 pandemic. Data sharing has reached unprecedented levels, allowing research to make swift progress. Our health system and our society have also adapted to changing conditions, using digital infrastructure and data sharing to provide remote

consultations, to monitor people with Covid-19 continuously at home, and to use mobile applications for contact tracing.

Data collection and management are accepted as fundamental to Ireland's efforts to tackle Covid-19. In September 2020 the government launched its Plan for Living with COVID-19,¹³ which will guide Ireland's response over the next six months. The plan recognises the crucial role of research in informing and shaping our immediate public health and policy response to Covid-19 and the vital importance of data in supporting the research process.

The Central Statistics Office (CSO), Department of Health, HSE, and others continue to support the collection, collation, and statistical analysis of Covid-19-related data. These include routinely collected health service data, census, and administrative data, and data from research cohorts. The HRB and the CSO are now establishing a mechanism to facilitate secure and controlled access to these data for research purposes.

A rising national priority

Short-term emergency responses to address Covid-19 need to be aligned with long-term agendas. The acceptance of data as an important strategic asset in responding to Covid-19 is accompanied by a greater awareness of the gaps and outstanding issues in research data management and sharing. The OECD refers to the need to ensure 'adequate data governance models, interoperable standards, data sharing agreement involving public sector, private sector and civil society incentives for researchers, sustainable infrastructures, human and institutional capabilities and mechanisms for access to data across borders'.¹⁴

“The European Commission strategy has long promoted digital transformation in health and care.”

Already in 2020, the HRB and others have committed to participate in two new EU initiatives, an European infrastructure project to handle population data on Covid-19¹⁵ and a Joint Action on EU Health Data Space that will focus on governance, data quality, and infrastructure of health data in Europe.¹⁶ The European Commission strategy has long promoted digital transformation in health and care. In October 2020 the member states prioritised the creation of a common health data space by the end of 2021.¹⁷

Is the timing right for Ireland to develop a national approach to research data? This will require leadership, a systems approach, a compelling vision, engagement with multiple stakeholders, and a focused pathway to implementation.

In July 2019 the government published a national framework on the transition to an open research environment.¹⁸ A national coordinator is now in place to help deliver a national planning exercise that involves representatives from key organisations discussing priorities for enabling FAIR research outputs, access to research infrastructures, capacity building for key support staff, implementing incentives and rewards for researchers, and open access publication.

The newly established Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, combined with the data-focused agenda from the Department of Health, could provide the answer. The opportunity for transformation needs to be matched with a strategic choice for investment.

ENDNOTES

1. Council for National Open Science Coordination. <https://conosc.org/>.
2. GO FAIR International Support and Coordination Office. <https://www.go-fair.org/>.
3. HRB Open Research is an open publishing platform that provides our researchers with an immediate and transparent publication through an open peer-review model. www.hrbopenresearch.org.
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Strengthening the Connections Between Research and Policy in Ireland

Designing the infrastructure for an important national resource

Covid-19 has changed our world. Never before in recent times has Ireland so needed to draw on its resources of knowledge to analyse, to better understand, and to make good decisions in uncertain times. We have a valuable and under-utilised resource in the research capacity of our higher education system to contribute to policymaking and evaluation. This article makes suggestions for a systematic and long-term focus on helping the research and policy communities to work together more effectively to address pressing questions.

There are a number of societal challenges, often involving complex human-environment systems, that are not fully understood and for which solutions are urgently required. ... The impacts of global warming, biodiversity loss, natural disasters, economic migration and health pandemics are manifest at multiples scales and require both technological and social innovations. In order to achieve this, different scientific disciplines, including natural and social sciences and humanities (SSH) need to work together and to fully engage other public and private sector actors, including policymakers. Solutions to complex societal challenges, such as those embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), cannot be generated based solely on disciplinary research but require a paradigm shift in research practice. (OECD Global Science Forum, 'Addressing Societal Challenges Using Transdisciplinary Research', OECD Policy Paper no. 88, June 2020)

Research into the natural sciences, technologies, medicine, the social sciences, the arts and humanities produces knowledge that enhances our culture and civilisation and contributes to the public good, for example through driving a sustainable economy, improving health and the quality of life, and protecting the environment. As such, research should be at the heart of Government with an effective dialogue and understanding between researchers, politicians and the public, so that policies and strategies are in place to bring about research that benefits society. (Sir Paul Nurse, Review of the UK Research Councils, November 2015)



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Introduction

Covid-19 has brought about profound changes in how we live. Quite apart from the restrictions it has imposed, it has challenged us to think about how we organise and deploy scarce national resources, one of which is the focus on effective policymaking, specifically how to strengthen the connections between research and policy to support better decision-making. How decisions get made has been thrown into sharp relief, and it is clear that the answers lie not just in the health, medical, and scientific spaces but also in important interactions between all research disciplines, at political level, and across civil society.

These are complex issues playing out in a complex landscape. Building on work I am undertaking in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), I would like to make some suggestions and proposals for a systematic, long-term focus on helping the research and policy communities in Ireland to work together more effectively to address pressing societal questions.

Policymakers and academics: Can they be friends?

In *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019–2020*, Charles Larkin of the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath posed a very interesting question: How can policymakers and academics be friends? He showed how the relationship can be deepened for the benefit of both parties and concluded that they not only can be friends but already are – though they do not know it yet. The next step, he suggested, is to deepen the relationship and find a common language which will allow both to flourish.

“Policymakers and academics not only can be friends but already are – though they do not know it yet.”

In a recent paper, ‘From lost in translation to gained in translation: How the research community and the public policy community need to find new ways of talking to each other’, I explored this important topic from the policymaker’s perspective. As a retired senior civil servant, I was invited in 2019 to take up a Visiting Research Fellowship in Public Policy at the Long Room Hub – the Arts and Humanities Institute in TCD: one of two such appointments, and, I understand, a first in Irish higher education.

Having spent time now in academia and noted similarities and contrasts with the policymaking world, it is clear to me that better dialogue between them is not only desirable but essential for our future well-being and development. There has been little focus in Ireland on the need to pay attention to this interface and to build a strong architecture to support it. This is particularly true of the arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS), which have struggled to input systematically to policy agendas. I wondered why, and what could be done.

How we got here: some historical perspectives

Investment in higher education research in Ireland began in earnest in the late 1990s with the Programme for Research in Third-Level Education (PRTL). Many important initiatives followed, including the establishment of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), the Irish Research Council (IRC), and Knowledge Transfer Ireland. All of the key national strategies that have

guided developments in this area in recent decades – the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006–2013, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the Higher Education System Performance Framework, Innovation 2020 – reference the policy connection. But it is not articulated as a key component in the same way as, say, building research capacity with the enterprise sector, though it is arguably of similar importance.

This may be changing, however. The midterm Review of Innovation 2020 noted that interdisciplinary research could be encouraged further to deliver economic or societal impact and that coordination between research and innovation performers and policymakers could be explored further.

So although an impressive higher education system has been built in Ireland over the past thirty years, it has tended to be discipline- and institution-oriented and has been less focused on developing the sort of connective tissue in the system that would support structural dialogue within and between the research and policy communities. This is true of both the scientific advisory community and the AHSS disciplines. On the practical side, there are few, if any, organised intermediate structures where expertise (particularly in the arts and humanities) has any systematic interaction with other disciplines in developing policy advice. In the third-level sector, there are very few places where scholars develop systematic interactions with policy as an integral part of their personal and professional development, or where subject-specific research is combined with knowledge-intensive interdisciplinary cooperation.

In a paper at the Institute of European Affairs this year entitled ‘Covid-19 and the future of higher education’, Patrick Prendergast, Provost of Trinity College, set out his analysis of two ‘waves of activity’ which advanced the Irish higher education system. He concluded that the first wave was transformative for education in Ireland, the second for research, and that the time has come for the ‘third wave’: to unite the two into a singular mission to create the most talented workforce in the world. He welcomed the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science as a unifying mechanism to support and develop this agenda.

“...the time has come to unite education and research into a singular mission to create the most talented workforce in the world.”
Prof Patrick Prendergast

What’s happening worldwide: key trends

The international literature on this issue shows important conclusions beginning to emerge:

- Many countries clearly consider research to be an important national and international resource for society and have invested in building up that infrastructure and developing connections to policymaking. In this context, it is important to consider how science is defined. In the EU a broad definition has been adopted covering a range of disciplines which are further defined as human scientists, social scientists, life, physical, health, computer, etc. This approach is not universally adopted; often a narrower, more focused definition is applied, with significant implications for national policy interaction. Worldwide, there are more examples of focused science policy institutions whose

mandate includes a clearly articulated responsibility to engage with the policymaking community.¹

- There is growing global interest in developing and supporting this architecture with the establishment of dedicated structures and systems to deepen relationships. There are interesting examples across the globe of the development of a strong support infrastructure. The Policy Impact Unit at University College London provides professional policy engagement expertise and support to help feed research-based evidence into UK policymaking. The Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy is pioneering new ways of bringing academia and government together. The work of SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies) has given particular emphasis to the connection between science and policymaking at European level.
- Finally, an important agenda is emerging in relation to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, which requires particular focus, attention, and investment. A recent paper from the OECD makes an important contribution to this debate.²

All of these are diverse aspects of a complex landscape. In attempting to tie the threads together, let me now consider how the infrastructure to support better relationships between the research and policymaking communities might be developed and strengthened in Ireland.

Next steps: Developing the architecture for dialogue in Ireland

To make progress on this agenda, I suggest that action needs to be initiated, led, and managed in three distinct but overlapping spaces:

- in the research community itself, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs)
- in our institutions of democracy, specifically in government and parliamentary machinery
- in the combined efforts of research funders.

“Ireland has a valuable and under-utilised resource in our Higher Education Institutions.”

Then all three have to design an architecture that enables them to engage positively with each other. Drawing on international experience, there are helpful models which can point to useful directions of action and experimentation.

Research community and HEIs

There are important actions to be taken at HEI level to support these relationships, which have implications for the nature of professional formation of academics. A clear articulation of the importance of the policy connect is an essential starting point, and creating a specific space in the framework for doctoral education would be extremely helpful.

Combining this with ongoing support through the induction, coaching, and mentoring supports offered to academics would deepen and develop these skills. The focused approach taken by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council in its Engaging with Government training course is an interesting model. It aims to:

- encourage academics to see opportunities where their research could make a valuable contribution in a public policy context
- challenge researchers to think more deeply about the policy process and the role of research in it
- increase the influencing and communication skills needed to achieve this.

Finally, the design of incentives and rewards in the system needs to be considered as part of an overall approach.

There is a need for a more integrated approach system-wide. This is where the Irish Universities Association could play a role. More connective tissue is required here. Again, there are interesting models to look at. We can see the establishment of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) in the UK to harness the collective research power and expertise of member universities and to make it easier for policymakers to draw on it to improve policy. The Alliance for Useful Evidence, established at UCL and hosted by Nesta, champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. At individual university level, Policy@Manchester and the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Bath are good examples of architecture to enable effective research collaborations that contribute to tackling public policy challenges in the UK and beyond.

Government and the Oireachtas

The second pillar focuses on the institutions of democracy, in this context the Oireachtas and government departments. Many Irish government departments have published data and research strategies, so it would be relatively easy to augment these along the lines of the UK model, where departments publish short Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) that tell the research community, in an accessible way, the pressing policy questions that are live in the system.

“The Alliance for Useful Evidence, established at UCL and hosted by Nesta, champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice.”

Allied to this, there needs to be focused investment in developing policy capacity in the system, particularly building on the work of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Services (IGEES) but broadened to include other disciplines.

Funders

Finally, there is the role of funders, principally the funding councils but also philanthropic organisations active in research. How programmes and calls are designed and evaluated fundamentally influences the shape and nature of the national research effort. Moving away from a purely discipline-led approach, as is being advocated in much of the literature in order to include a wider variety of knowledge and perspectives, will require significant thought and cooperation.

Strong discipline competence is essential for strong interdisciplinarity, so both require support mechanisms. There is work to be done to think about the alignment of programmes and calls, how they are designed, who

inputs, and from where. How they are evaluated, and who evaluates, is also important.

Variou other new approaches are clearly necessary to support the change. The IRC has a government ‘shadowing’ scheme where one of our early career researchers shadows a TD or minister.³ It has been working well and raises awareness at both ends. The SFI Public Service Fellowship is a pilot initiative which offers researchers a unique opportunity to be temporarily seconded to government departments, agencies, and the Library & Research Service of the Oireachtas, to work on specific projects where they can add value, with mutually beneficial outcomes. This is an important pathfinder and could surely be replicated in the system in both directions.

In another interesting initiative, the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ERC) and the Government Office for Science (GO) have jointly funded two fellowships designed ‘to enable genuine co-creation (of projects, analysis and programmes of work) between researchers and those making and informing policy’ based on using ARIs.

Conclusion

This is a timely debate. Never more in recent times have we so needed to draw on our resources of knowledge to analyse, to better understand, and to make good decisions in uncertain circumstances. Supporting Ireland to better achieve its potential and create a better and more sustainable society and economy is a matter of great urgency. Building relationships and mutual trust is at the heart of this effort.

Ireland has a valuable and under-utilised resource in our HEIs. The new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science provides an important opportunity to develop a more joined-up approach, bringing together a whole-system view of policy, structures, and funding. Given the challenges we face, nationally and globally, it couldn’t have come at a more important moment.

ENDNOTES

1. The Institute for Science, Society and Policy is a cross-faculty institute at the University of Ottawa exploring the links between those domains. The Rathenau Institute in the Netherlands supports the formation of public and political opinion of socially relevant aspects of science and technology. There are far fewer examples of dedicated structures in AHSS; one is SKAPE, the Centre for Science, Knowledge and Policy at Edinburgh University.
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Map or Guide?

The evolving use of scientific evidence to inform social policies and programmes in complex settings

No one advocates for policy or social programmes with an absence of evidence. However, greater appreciation of the complexities of social policies and programmes presents new demands for the application of scientific evidence to resolve real-world problems.

Evidence in programmes is like apples in pies

It is unnecessary to append the word ‘evidence’ to social programmes nowadays. Its ubiquity makes any ambition toward evidence-based policy a *So what?* claim, at least in normative terms. Evidence-based programmes (EBPs) are like apples in pie: why wouldn’t you want it?

EBP as a paradigm has its origins in social and welfare programmes in the US,¹ took hold in the 1980s and became a social-science high-water mark in the 1990s and early 2000s. At its peak, advocates determined a hierarchy of evidence for social programmes, with randomised control trials (RCTs) at its zenith. RCT is a method that randomly assigns research subjects to control or treatment groups, thus controlling for possible external influences and establishing a counterfactual baseline to determine the true effect of an intervention. In youth justice, the hierarchy of evidence has been used to recommend whether programmes should be supported by government funding.²

On closer examination, however, some observers questioned the veracity of claims of public investment being skewed toward EBP. This commentary, with some merit, holds that EBP is still quite peripheral in reality, limited to programme-islands based on professional discipline or appended to business as usual as hermetic entities but external to the silos they were intended to disrupt.

Challenges presented by context

Other commentators say the evidence to support EBP is limited: that RCTs are only one type of evidence, albeit with experimental surety, that should be considered alongside other important sources (e.g., craft knowledge from front-line professionals and citizens’ lived experience). The reasoning suggests that multiple data points make for better judgements, and that the effects of EBP are determined significantly by context.

Sean Redmond

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A recent evaluation undertaken by Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP), of Ireland's first bail supervision programme for young people,³ was careful to parse out the 'enabling conditions' shown to be instrumental in assuring optimal performance. While RCT probably offers the highest standard of causal claim for attributing a particular outcome to a particular programme of intervention, its inability to explain *why* and *how* – a good example of the 'black-box effect' – can impoverish policymaking because of the need to generalise learning from programme experience.

This need is particularly stark in more complex contexts, where theory development arising from thematically testing programme hypotheses can shed light on 'stuck' problems. Moreover, this limited knowledge exchange, which shares only results-related information from EBP without showing the mechanisms under the bonnet risks a dependency relationship between policymakers and EBP providers.

If epistemic communities have been elevated to arbitrating what is important to research and the rules for determining the threshold for viable evidence, and retain *why* and *how* knowledge regarding programme performance, legitimate concerns have been raised about who governs science.⁴

Policy-informed evidence?

Thankfully, a more mature relationship appears to be developing between policy decision-making and science in the area of youth justice in Ireland. Here, REPPP and youth-justice decision makers are developing a 'policy-informed evidence' discourse recognising that values and science are not easily separable.⁵ Tension will always exist from science speaking truth to power, however uncomfortable, by way of rigorous methods and procedures. But there is a compelling argument that the values informing priorities for science be distributed more appropriately across the political system and civic society.

Policy-informed evidence has led to some interesting scientific requests to REPPP by policymakers. One request, also seed-funded by the Irish Research Council,⁶ refers to mining routine data held in the youth justice system in Ireland to determine its capacity to yield outcome-related information, aligned to policy aspirations for young people. Lots of institutional energy is dedicated to data collection, but it is questionable to what degree the data can provide more than evidence on investment levels (inputs) and programme activity (outputs), as opposed to whether the activity itself is associated with better outcomes for society.

This research, which included a comparative study of jurisdictions considered to be youth justice leaders, suggests that Ireland is in good company with its data limitations. The research also, importantly, provides practical fixes to improve the capacity for outcomes-based evidence and aspirations toward youth justice policy reform.⁷

Another request refers to co-designing a more effective model of relationship-building with young people and front-line youth professionals.

“ Legitimate concerns have been raised about who governs science.

“ Wicked problems are complex, regressive, and subject to the vagaries of external systems.

From a values perspective, there is a clear imperative. One of the largest Department of Justice investments in the youth justice space is the national Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) programme, which operates in collaboration with voluntary youth organisations.⁸ GYDP was allocated over €18 million in 2020.⁹ Approximately 75%–80% of its budget is spent on professional time (i.e., salaries) by collaborating youth organisations. At least 60% of professional time is spent on building effective relationships with young people to bring about positive change.

Professionals, young people, families, and communities all value relationships. However, for an estimated investment of at least €8 million a year dedicated solely to relationships, very little is known or documented, in Ireland or internationally, about the most effective exchanges, risking quality by geography.¹⁰ Better understanding of what is known about effective change relationships has huge potential for informing other human service programmes sponsored by the state.

Relationships and relational practices are hugely intriguing to science as a way to help young people navigate adversity. Research in this area offers the prospect of modelling and scaling effective interactions bottom-up, from micro individual exchanges between youth professionals and young people to the macro design of targeted youth programmes. Over the last two years, REPPP has been co-designing action research with front-line professionals after a wide-ranging systematic evidence review. REPPP's approach has incorporated design thinking, where user knowledge is integral to discovery – not just intelligence to help implement evidence-based programmes.

Big science can confidently predict general patterns of youth offending, aligning Ireland to international trends which indicate that children who commit crime generally grow out of it as they mature into young adults. The evidence supports a light-touch policy, keeping children out of the criminal justice system if possible. Indeed, over the years, thousands of tax-paying, law-abiding adults have probably benefited from this often-unsung, evidence-informed policy which ensures they are not burdened forever with a criminal conviction.

Far less is known about those who do not follow this trend. Referred to as the 'right-hand tail',¹¹ a very small group of children are considered to be responsible for over half of all youth-related crime. Another policy-informed evidence request to REPPP is to better understand the contexts of children involved in crime networks, particularly collaborations with adult-network actors.

Programme responses, though receiving increasing international attention, remain under-developed and limited. REPPP's application of social-network analysis to determine patterns and flows in criminal networks, and its qualitative examination of networks using our own methodological innovation Twinsight¹² to disclose narratives of networks actors and their relationships, led to an evidence base sufficient to fund and trial two intervention programmes in 2020. This research, which takes us into the realms of complex youth-justice design, is attracting significant international interest.

Wicked problems: the clamour for plans and the need for competent stewardship

The phrase *wicked problem*, originally coined by Horst Rittel in 1973,¹³ is creeping into mainstream discourse on programme planning. Wicked problems contrast with ‘tame problems’, which are linear and bounded, play by the rules, and require only scientific, technological, or engineering solutions, for example designing a railway system.

Wicked problems are complex, regressive, and subject to the vagaries of external systems. They have competing interests advocating diverse diagnosis and remedies. Such complexity leaves programme planners with options that are not solely right or wrong but good or bad, dealing with infrastructural legacies of bad historical decisions and ongoing exposure as plans roll out, due to limited opportunities to lab-test solutions and plan their application before hitting the ground in real-life.

It was not prescience but post-1960s scepticism that led to the name *wicked problem*. However, loosely comparing Rittel’s ten properties of wicked problems to the presentation of the Covid-19 pandemic, the fit is compelling and sobering. Plans and evidence-based programmes, however well substantiated, are brittle in the face of the turbulence and unique challenges of wicked problems. As the boxer Mike Tyson said, ‘Everyone has a plan till they get punched in the mouth.’

Nevertheless, plans and programmes are widely demanded when the most effective way to chart a bumpy trajectory ‘north’¹⁴ to resolve or survive a wicked problem is probably competent stewardship. Facing persistent instability and significant knowledge gaps, but with a need to forge through the fog, would you put your trust in quality-assured route planning offered by Google Maps, or in a policy version of Amelia Earhart drawing on her scientific and craft knowledge to muddle through?¹⁵ I know which one I would choose.

At the request of policymakers, REPPP works with coalitions of stakeholders to understand and work through real-life wicked problems in local communities in Ireland using Rittel’s framework.¹⁶ The problems encountered concern community safety, perceived trust gaps between state and local community action, and embedded intergenerational drug economies. The problems may not be at pandemic level, but they are no less important to a citizen’s lived experience.

The wicked problem challenge has demanded a far more dynamic application of evidence to supporting real-time judgement and navigable, reflexive strategies for improvement. For more information on the work of the Research Evidence into Policy Programmes and Practice initiative, funded by the Department of Justice, please visit <https://ulsites.ul.ie/law/node/106531> or contact Dr Sean Redmond at sean.redmond@ul.ie. Follow us on Twitter: @REPPP4.

“The wicked problem challenge has demanded a far more dynamic application of evidence...”

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“Research is creating new knowledge.”

– Neil Armstrong

In 2020, the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) marked its 80th anniversary. It was also the first investment in fundamental research by a new Irish state. This article reflects on DIAS's history as a case study on the possibilities created through investment in fundamental research, and looks to the importance of fundamental research for the future.

Pioneering origins

When the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) was established by the government in 1940, it was aimed at promoting Ireland's international standing through scholarship and was the world's second-ever institute for advanced studies. DIAS was closely modelled on the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) Princeton, a new type of stand-alone institution established in the 1930s to push beyond the limits of human knowledge through fundamental, curiosity-driven research. Ireland's decision to invest public resources in pure scientific discovery for the first time, in a period of global uncertainty and financial constraint nationally, represents a cultural landmark for the country.

Today, DIAS remains Ireland's only institute for advanced studies. It is a globally embedded organisation that attracts talent from all over the world to conduct fundamental research in three areas with a humanistic and scientific focus: Celtic Studies, Theoretical Physics, and Cosmic Physics (encompassing Astronomy, Astrophysics, and Geophysics). Our research gains insights into Celtic society and its legacy; progresses our understanding of our island, our planet, and the universe; and deciphers the mathematical principles underpinning nature. DIAS also leads Ireland's participation in a number of international and global research endeavours that focus on the big unanswered questions for humankind.

The place of DIAS in the Irish ecosystem

DIAS occupies a unique position in Ireland's higher education and research ecosystem as its only independent institute for advanced studies. It is differentiated from the other institutions by its special mandate to focus on fundamental research. Because of that, DIAS stands out as a place that offers researchers the opportunity to study some of the most difficult open questions of our time. It acts as a national hub for its disciplines and has very strong international connections, while also advancing the establishment of common research infrastructures in Ireland, Europe, and the world.

Reflecting on the Past and Next 80 Years of Fundamental Research

The case study of DIAS



Eucharía Meehan
Registrar and CEO,
Dublin Institute for
Advanced Studies

For eighty years, DIAS has attracted outstanding researchers to Ireland and, while it is not a degree-awarding body, it provides mentoring and training for hosted postgraduate students and early-career researchers at a stage when independent research is important for their intellectual development. It is a clear beacon to the international arena of Ireland's commitment to fundamental research. DIAS's presence thus strengthens the national objective for a diverse, but coherent, research-performing landscape.

Ongoing impact grounded in eighty years of discovery

In 1944, Nobel Prize-winning Erwin Schrödinger, director of theoretical physics at DIAS, published his book *What Is Life?* and provided the theoretical prediction of how genetic information is stored, encouraging the discovery of the nature of DNA in the 1950s. In a matter of years, Schrödinger demonstrated the value of the DIAS approach to research, an approach that continues today in our mission to engage in unconstrained thought. The following examples illustrate this impact from each of our disciplines:

Irish space research pioneers: Last year, DIAS celebrated fifty years as pioneers in space research. From 1969, when Professor Denis O'Sullivan received some of the first lunar material for analysis after the Apollo 11 mission to the Moon, to 1972, when DIAS had the first Irish experiment in space, on Apollo 16 (studying cosmic rays), followed by seventeen further experiments on subsequent missions, and continuing to the present day with DIAS's work on scientific and research instruments on the Solar Orbiter and James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), DIAS has been a trailblazer for Ireland's growing space industry.

“ DIAS has been a trailblazer for Ireland's growing space industry.”

Expansion of the Irish continental shelf: In the early 1980s, DIAS Senior Professor Brian Jacob instigated fundamental research that by 1987 would lead to an unequivocal demonstration that the Irish continental shelf extends out through the Porcupine and Rockall Basins, thereby enabling the enlargement of Ireland's zone of economic interest by a factor of ten. DIAS's leadership of the iMARL Atlantic ocean-floor listening project and associated research continues this legacy today.

Mathematical and physical eponyms: DIAS's impact in mathematics and physics is best known through the formulae and equations developed by our professors and recognised by their peers. Erwin Schrödinger's seminal work is joined, for example, by Sygne's Theorem, the Lanczos Algorithm and Resampling, the O'Raifeartaigh Theorem and Model, and the Nahm Equations and Transform – all known to scholars and academics across physics, computing, and mathematics. Our researchers in the School of Theoretical Physics today have influenced the future of quantum computing through discoveries in the statistical concepts for the description of quantum information.

Irish Script on Screen: Informed by earlier challenges in the study of Irish manuscripts, the DIAS School of Celtic Studies in 1999 initiated the visionary Irish Script on Screen (ISOS) project to digitise and make freely available online Ireland's manuscript wealth. This has led to the permanent preservation of 425 of the 5,000 known Irish manuscripts so far and has brought many of those manuscripts now residing outside the country home

into a single digital library located in Ireland. The ISOS website receives over 4 million hits from thirty countries each year.

Today, DIAS is a galvaniser in initiating and enabling national infrastructures and collaborative research endeavours in Ireland. It is also globally recognised for its expertise in its areas of advanced study and regularly participates in international projects and consortia that draw down funding from some of the most competitive sources, the European Commission's Horizon 2020 programme, and flagship intergovernmental agencies like the European Space Agency (ESA).

The future

DIAS is a unique institution with a proud history, but it is also firmly focused on continued impact in the future. In November 2018, DIAS launched an ambitious strategy, *Globally Embedded, Strength Locally*, which will reinforce its status as a powerhouse in scholarship, while signalling Ireland's commitment to fundamental research internationally. The strategy sets out four strategic goals for attaining our vision:

1. Discovery of new knowledge and understanding through excellence and researcher-led endeavour

DIAS will continue to deliver on its mandate, be a beacon for fundamental research, and thus deliver social, cultural, and economic benefits. Over the next number of years, research and advanced study at DIAS will continue to be driven by the desire to gain understanding for the long-term benefit of humanity, Ireland, and the world. We will strengthen our position by implementing new research themes across our disciplines and identifying a new area requiring an advanced study focus for the benefit of us all.

“DIAS will continue to be a beacon for fundamental research, and thus deliver social, cultural, and economic benefits.”

2. International research collaboration benefitting Ireland and the world

DIAS stands out as an entity which, from its inception, is highly internationalised and globally recognised. We are leveraging our excellence and international connectedness by exploring opportunities to contribute to solving global challenges through research, for example on Earth System Change and the Sustainable Development Goals. We are also building on our current collaborations with international consortia and infrastructures, for example, the High Energy Stereoscopic System (HESS), JWST (successor to Hubble), the ESA, European Southern Observatory (ESO), and the European Plate Observing System (EPOS).

3. Attraction and cultivation of research leaders

An opportunity now exists in the changing international landscape to attract world-leading emerging researchers to Ireland, with the potential to revitalise the Irish higher education and research-performing system. DIAS, with its strong international brand and reputation, will continue to be a magnet for excellent researchers in each of its specialised branches of knowledge through flexible and diverse recruitment at all career levels and

by providing visitor and adjunct faculty programmes to researchers in other areas of the national and international systems.

4. Strengthening disciplines and research communities nationally

At DIAS, we believe we have a responsibility and duty to our disciplines and by extension to their associated communities. We will expand on our offering of specialist seminars and lectures and introduce regular annual summer schools for the benefit of the national and international communities. We will extend our public outreach activities across our disciplines. Shaping the direction of research in Ireland through statements and proposals will also contribute to strengthening our disciplines nationally.

The increasing relevance of fundamental research

DIAS moves into the next phase of its development at a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty in Europe and worldwide. There is growing concern about the sustainability of our planet and an almost ubiquitous desire to understand our Earth and its natural systems better, now made more urgent by the global pandemic which we face. Similarly, the thirst to better understand the Sun, the stars in distant galaxies, and the fundamental physical and mathematical underpinnings of our universe has never been greater. Furthermore, as identity grows as a theme in national and European discourse, so too does the need to understand our past and ourselves as a people, whether that is on our own island, as part of Europe, or as global citizens.

In this context, DIAS and the fundamental research it performs have never had more relevance. As we look to the next eighty years and the conduct of fundamental research in all disciplines, the resulting knowledge and understanding are clearly both essential and desirable. Ireland must continue to take its place on the world stage and engage in, and fund, fundamental research. To do otherwise would diminish us as citizens of the world and as conscientious occupants of our planet Earth.

“All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.”

– Galileo Galilei

Seen as the 'third mission' in higher education, knowledge transfer and the commercialisation of research results offers a complementary channel for dissemination and delivery of economic and societal benefit. This article considers the development of knowledge-transfer policy and practice in Ireland and looks ahead to what the future holds.

The term *knowledge transfer* has been adopted to refer to research commercialisation and collaboration by the higher education sector with users of research. Increasingly this is about engaging with all users of research and expertise, from industry to the public sector and NGOs. In Ireland the focus is on supporting existing and emerging companies, with a clear link to the role of higher education in economic development. This has been a constant in research and innovation policy development over the past fifteen years. The expectations from the higher education system may be greater as we look to economic recovery from the effects of the Covid-19 crisis. Whether these can be met depends on multiple factors.

From the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006–2013 through to Innovation 2020, the importance of research and knowledge transfer is called out in national strategy. This is likely to continue in the successor strategic plan for science and innovation that is currently in development. Producing a highly skilled workforce and providing access to the brightest minds and the latest developments are essential components in a successful knowledge economy.

The latest data, in Knowledge Transfer Ireland's (KTI) Annual Knowledge Transfer Survey, show that there were over 2,000 live research collaboration projects between third level and companies at the end of 2019. Over 200 licences were signed, providing companies with access to new intellectual property, and twenty-six new companies were created based on knowledge and intellectual property developed in higher education institutions (HEIs).

Conditions for success

These kinds of success are not created in a vacuum: they require the ecosystem in which government, the academy, and industry are key players. In practice this involves coherent strategies, appropriate policies and funding, an engaged research base, and an enterprise and

Knowledge Transfer: From Engagement to Commercialisation of Research

Development and future trends



Alison Campbell
Director, Knowledge Transfer Ireland

investment community that appreciates research as a driver for innovation and is willing to engage.

Such a triple helix exists in positive dynamic tension. It is the challenge of governments and their departments to create the right balance, enabling innovation to flourish while preserving the fundamental research base that provides security and opportunities for the future. Steering a course for the medium- to long-term future while managing the short-term priorities is a matter of adaptation and foresight, in equal measure.

Through policy and practice, the infrastructure to support innovation from research has been created and programmes designed and delivered to meet changing demand. A keystone intervention was the creation of the Technology Transfer Strengthening Initiative (TTSI), a cycle of funding that supports innovation offices in the HEIs. The rationale for the programme was based on international best practice and the recommendation from a taskforce convened by the then Department for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. Enterprise Ireland (EI) was given the mandate to develop and implement the programme.

Now in its third cycle, TTSI assists many of the HEIs, through co-funding for skilled people and operational costs, to identify and develop new commercial opportunities with and for enterprise. It has been highly commended in international peer review, as have the people on the ground and the initiatives that have been sparked through the programme. The demands on innovation offices are increasing, through the volume and range of activities they are required to cover and the complexity of the work they undertake. This is a sign of the system's maturity.

The challenge is how to sustain this and to provide support across the higher education sector, at a time when HEIs, companies, and investors face stark financial choices. The case for continued intervention is compelling. The data show that companies that innovate through R&D and collaborate with third level have double the turnover of those that do not, and they employ 50% more staff. The focus for delivery under such a programme, however, needs to be keyed to emerging national priorities.

Any programme of funding can only be effective if the system in which it operates is itself effective and aligned. For knowledge transfer to succeed, other supports, such as the Enterprise Ireland Commercial Fund and the people who manage it, are vital to bring new opportunities through to a stage of maturity that makes them attractive commercial propositions. Programmes that build critical research mass can provide a compelling resource to companies and are particularly valuable when combined with the right entry points.

Ireland has been particularly adept in this regard, through the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Research Centres of scale to the focussed EI/IDA Research Gateways and funding programmes that encourage and support companies to collaborate. This signals a research system that is open and accessible for companies. However, research in higher education remains a complex landscape which many companies say they find hard to navigate. More attention needs to be brought to how they can be assisted and how

they can be exposed to different disciplines as the significance of cross-boundary R&D becomes more essential to disruptive innovation.

Regional responses

In other countries, there has been increasing emphasis on place in research and innovation. This has long been understood in Ireland. Regional connections between HEIs and companies are strong. The formation of the Technological Universities (TUs) is significant and will see scaling in the regional research offer, with greater research capacity and capability.

As the TUs develop, attention is being given to how they can best support research and innovation, both from within the TUs and through targeted programmes, such as the Regional Technology Cluster Fund. An element to their success in knowledge transfer will be working together to develop and share new practice to ensure that 'regional' and 'national' are synonymous. Collaboration in knowledge transfer in the sector has been strong and bodes well for accelerating the pace of development and the voice of the sector to be heard.

That Ireland has a vibrant knowledge-transfer system is clear. This has been underscored in 2020 as the system responded to the challenges of Covid-19. Throughout the country, HEIs have played an important role collaborating with the private sector. For example, research teams at NUI Galway and University of Limerick worked together to develop a novel solution to sanitise public spaces called UVC Drone. Using ultraviolet (UV) light radiation to sterilise, the UVC Drone has been programmed with a bespoke AI algorithm to switch on overnight when the premises are unoccupied and to recharge itself once cleaning has finished.

At Waterford Institute of Technology, the SEAM research centre produced a prototype for full face masks with integrated humidity moisture which means they don't fog up. Working with local manufacturing companies, this type of personal protective equipment (PPE) can now be sourced in Ireland. Bringing TU Dublin technology to the market, spin-out company Kastus Technologies provides an antimicrobial coating which offers 99.99% reduction in harmful bacteria and fungi on a range of surfaces. Confirmed to be effective against Covid-19, this has been a win-win for the company and for society at large.

No room for complacency

These examples are but a few. There has been substantial breadth and depth of collaboration with companies and in the types of new companies formed from third level. But this is not cause for complacency. As the system matures, the way that knowledge-transfer support is delivered changes with it. There are, and will continue to be, insufficient resources to support all opportunities and transactions equally. There will need to be more prioritisation of where effort should be expended and associated practice developed to enable swifter triage and to speed up negotiations.

The latter can be enabled by increased use of national template agreements, a direction of travel that is increasingly supported by the funding agencies. It also requires support from senior leadership in the HEIs and agencies

to balance risk management and the fear that the next blockbuster may be missed against the need to get the deal done. That way, companies can get on with the business of innovating to grow, scale, and create the high-value jobs that are at the core of the national strategy for research commercialisation. To this end, companies and founders need to be helped to understand the way that HEIs can do business with them and be willing to respond with pace.

Future trends

Two significant trends in knowledge transfer are worth drawing out, as they have implications for future practice. The first is that larger companies are looking more to smaller companies as innovation partners. These will often be spin-outs from HEIs, which are able to develop and de-risk the technology or concept in a way that a HEI cannot, with a commercial focus and dedicated investment funding. The spin-out may also offer different commercial terms and timelines that are not available in an academic institution.

This will not in itself significantly disrupt the volume of engagement between third level and companies. But it does suggest that professional project management (before and during delivery) and ease of contract negotiation are areas that will be increasingly important for HEIs. This trend also points to a more pervasive role for spin-out companies in the innovation ecosystem, and to the importance of creating spin-outs from research.

The second trend, picked up at the AKTS 2019 workshop, is the volume of research in third level that depends on engagement with companies. If we look at research expenditure during the year across the HEIs, 14% of budget was related to collaboration with industry, whether the funding came directly from the company or through co-funding from government agencies. This provides a glimpse at the proportion of research carried out with the enterprise base. It is encouraging but may also suggest a vulnerability in the system, should there be a drop in the level of company engagement or the level of public funding for such engagement.

The Irish higher education sector, if properly supported, is well placed to play a key role in reigniting the economy. Returns have been seen already as companies have accessed research and expertise. The sector has shown itself agile and responsive during the pandemic. But this has not happened overnight. It is as a result of long-term intentional investment in research and in knowledge-transfer supports.

Expectations for the future must be realistic. Viewing the sector in isolation as a panacea is unwise. Outputs must be measured against inputs and with an appreciation of the capacity constraints in the sector. Research and innovation investment will need to be positioned to assist immediate challenges without compromising the future, which relies on sustaining high-quality research as a platform from which to innovate. The research and innovation ecosystem in which HEIs operate needs to remain cohesive and supportive to allow them to achieve. It's a balancing act, but one at which we have proven adept.

This article explores what ‘research impact’ means and the approaches that Irish higher education institutions and funding agencies are using to plan, capture, communicate, and monitor the impact of research on society. In particular it details what UCD has done in response to the research impact challenge.

What is research impact?

Research impact is the effect that research has on society. Research contributes to the world in many ways – it improves our health and well-being, creates economic prosperity, enriches our cultural lives, improves environmental sustainability, and contributes to government policymaking.

Approximately €800m per year of Irish tax-payers’ money goes to fund research in higher education institutions (HEIs),¹ prompting an important question: What is the benefit of this investment for citizens in Ireland and further afield? This need for accountability of public spending is a key driver of the so-called impact agenda.

The research impact agenda

The research impact agenda has been gaining momentum in recent years as policymakers grapple with the need to prove the value of research conducted in HEIs. The idea of assessing the impact of research in a serious and systematic way originated in Australia, with the abandoned Research Quality Framework (RQF)² in the mid-2000s. The RQF used case studies to describe the impact of completed research – a system eventually adopted in the UK’s 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF).³ Countries and regions across Europe have taken different approaches⁴ to assessing research impact, but to date there appears to be no common taxonomy or consistent way of doing so.

In Ireland, research impact has historically been expressed through bibliometric analysis of research publications in peer-reviewed journals⁵ In 2012, following the financial crisis, *research prioritisation* emerged as the government’s primary policy goal in science, technology, and innovation.⁶ This saw a concentration of the competitive research funding on areas deemed most likely to secure greater economic and societal impact, particularly in the form of jobs and foreign direct investment. The research prioritisation areas were refreshed in 2017 to

Research Impact Toolkit

Planning, capturing, communicating, and monitoring the impact of research in higher education institutions



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ensure that Ireland ‘optimises the opportunities arising from new science and technology developments and disruptions’.

Launched in 2015, Innovation 2020 is Ireland’s current strategy for research and development, science, and technology.⁷ Using the Report of the Research Prioritisation Steering Group as an input, it calls for ‘excellent research to be performed in strategically important areas with relevance and impact for the economy and society’.

Research funding agencies have been quick to embed research impact into their strategies. Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) published its strategy document Agenda 2020 in 2013,⁸ setting out a vision in which Ireland will be the ‘best country in the world for both scientific research excellence and impact’ by 2020. To help implement this strategy, SFI developed an impact framework that provides guidance on how to prepare an impact statement and how metrics and narrative in support of impact should be reported.⁹ An impact statement is a short section in a research proposal that explains the significance of the research.

Similarly, the Irish Research Council’s (IRC) strategy identifies opportunities to further improve the impact and reach of the research it supports.¹⁰ The IRC strategy looks to establish and implement a new ‘broad-based, comprehensive impact framework for IRC-funded researchers’. The IRC also wishes to ‘regularly publish and disseminate quantitative and qualitative information on the impact of the awards they fund across all disciplines’.

Further afield, the European Union, through the Horizon 2020 research funding initiative, broadly defines impact as ‘the wider societal, economic, or environmental cumulative changes over a longer period of time’. Impact was first included as a selection and award criterion for research in the 7th Framework Programme (2007–2013). In Horizon 2020 (2014–2020), impact gained importance as one of three evaluation criteria, after ‘excellence’ and before ‘quality and efficiency of the implementation’. Horizon Europe (2021–2027), the 9th Framework Programme, continues Horizon 2020’s focus on impact assessment.

The reasoning behind the growing international move towards assessing research impact is complex, involving political and socio-economic factors. In the literature on impact, four critical justifications for assessing research impact are generally cited:

1. Higher Education Institutions overview – To enable research organisations to monitor and manage their performance and understand the contribution they are making to communities.
2. Accountability – To demonstrate the value of research to government, stakeholders, and the wider public.
3. Inform funding – To understand the socio-economic value of research and subsequently inform funding decisions.
4. Impact Journey – To understand the method and routes by which research leads to impacts, optimising the potential of research findings and developing better ways of delivering impact.¹¹

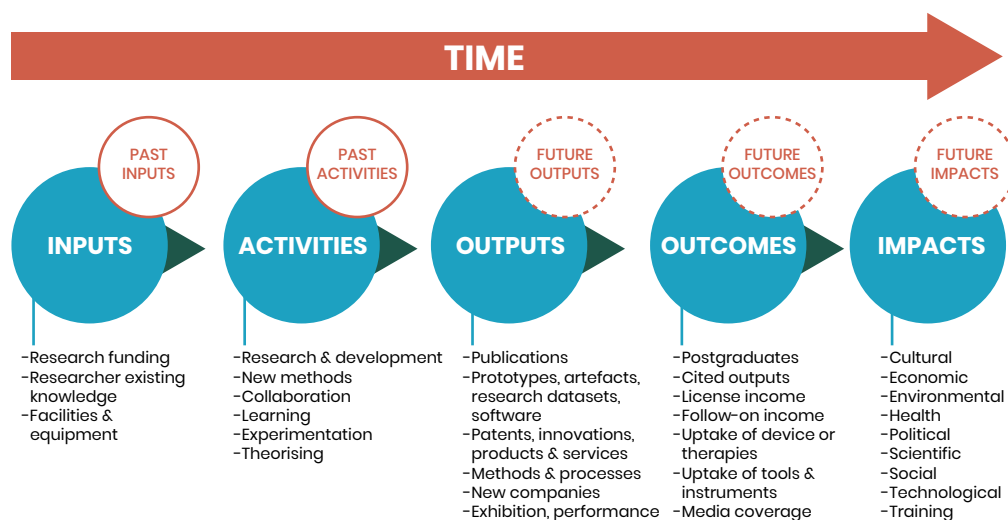
“ The Irish Research Council’s strategy identifies opportunities to further improve the impact and reach of the research it supports.”

Impact journey

The impact journey describes how research can lead to impacts on society and the economy. It traces research over time, distinguishing between different five stages on the pathway to impact:

- *Inputs* include the human, financial, organisational, and community resources needed to perform the research.
- *Activities* are the processes, tools, events, technology, and actions that are an intentional part of the research.
- *Outputs* are products of research: scholarly publications (but not forgetting grey literature), products: prototype artefacts, research datasets, software; patents.
- *Outcomes* are the results or consequences of the research activities and outputs on academia, society, or the economy.
- *Impacts* are changes in society that result from outputs and outcomes.

The diagram below, based on the Kellogg Foundation logic model, demonstrates this pathway, with examples under each of the five stages.¹²



Although this a simple model – in reality, research journeys are non-linear and far more complex – it is a useful framework for thinking about what is needed for research to have an effect on the world.

The challenge

The methodological challenges in assessing research impact have been well documented.¹³ To plan, capture, communicate, and monitor impact, researchers need to think systematically about the various ways people can benefit from their work. This is more important than ever, as major funding bodies around the world now consider impact a fundamental aspect of almost all research programmes.

Although the impact of some research is apparent straight away, in other cases it can take years, even decades. These impacts may be the result of

hundreds of factors, of which the research is just one. Research can affect all aspects of society,¹⁴ from culture to policy to the environment. A single project can have impact in many areas, and one impact may have knock-on effects elsewhere in society. These distant time horizons and tangled pathways can make it extremely difficult to plan, capture, communicate, and monitor impact.

What UCD has done

In response to the research impact challenge, a UCD 'Beyond Publications' steering committee was set up in 2013 to investigate the definitions, evidence, and systems for capturing outputs beyond publications, and the resulting impacts of research from the perspective of the university.

The committee's report, published in 2014, recommended that UCD should strive to be a leader in the field of impact capture, measurement, and communication.¹⁵ In response, a research impact work programme was initiated in 2015 to develop capacity for research impact at UCD. It yielded many practical supports and resources for researchers:

- A website aimed at researchers and research managers who are keen to understand how social media, and other online channels, can be leveraged to promote their research and its outcomes.¹⁶
- A new researcher profiles system to record impact.¹⁷ The system is used to create researcher profile pages on UCD websites. The publicly available profiles are used by academics, industry, and organisations to identify potential collaborators for research projects, and by potential students to identify supervisors.
- An annual research impact case study competition to build capacity throughout UCD in capturing research impact. It encourages all researchers, regardless of discipline, to consider and celebrate the impact of their work. The competition offers researchers at UCD an opportunity to develop a short, written case study, with illustrative images, highlighting the impact of their research to an external, non-specialist audience.¹⁸
- A research impact portal website providing supports and resources to help researchers to plan, capture, communicate, and monitor their impact.¹⁹
- A research impact website to showcase UCD's research impact case studies in areas such as Agri-Food, Culture, Economy and Society, Environment, Health, and ICT.²⁰
- An impact seminar series bringing national and international research impact experts to UCD, offering valuable impact-related insights to researchers and the wider research community across UCD and Ireland.
- A selection of tools to support research impact, such as the UCD Impact Planning Canvas, Elsevier SciVal (a bibliometric analysis tool), and Altmetrics.²¹ Altmetrics provide an indication of where academic papers are being used, by counting downloads, views, and references in policy documents, as well as mentions in social media, blogs, and so on. Altmetrics provide a new way of evidencing societal impact.
- A dedicated Research Analytics and Impact team that promotes the university's research reputation, embeds a culture of research

impact throughout the university, and informs research strategy and performance through advanced analytics.²²

What are we working on now?

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) recently awarded funding to UCD to develop and share its impact-related resources, such as an online toolkit and online training material. With support from the IRC, UCD is consulting Ireland's wider research sector on this project, with the aim of helping the sector to speak with one voice and avoid duplication of effort.

A research impact working group has been formed to facilitate this collaboration, with representatives from Ireland's universities, institutes of technology, funding agencies, and sectoral representative bodies. Using feedback from this group, UCD will update and expand its impact-related tools, resources, and definitions and share these across the sector. This work is due to complete in December 2020.

“ Research can affect all aspects of society, from culture to policy to the environment.”

Through this project, UCD will develop new impact resources, refine its existing resources, and consolidate their place on the UCD website as a new Research Impact Toolkit resource. Existing resources can be found on UCD's impact homepage.²³ The supports and resources we will develop through this project include the following:

- videos giving a short overview of research impact, associated terminology, and importance in the research ecosystem
- definitions of impact and related terms
- a taxonomy (or classification system) of types of societal impact
- an updated Impact Planning Canvas
- guidance on what makes a good case study
- guidance on writing impact sections in funding applications
- links to existing resources by other HEIs and third parties
- exemplar impact case studies to demonstrate best practice.

Sharing the Research Impact Toolkit across the sector will increase efficiency, ensuring different institutions and organisations do not duplicate efforts. By working together in this way, the Irish research sector will be better able to demonstrate value for money of publicly funded research. Ultimately, with consistent messaging, researchers will be better able to plan for impact, yielding greater benefits for society both nationally and internationally.

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“ You can never cross the ocean until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

– Christopher Columbus

This article explores how the sudden unanticipated closure of research facilities in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on the research community, especially on early career researchers. It focuses in particular on the effects of reduced mobility.

In Ireland, as in other countries globally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated travel restrictions on research activities has been very significant. Indeed, it is now clear that the disruption will extend into 2021, and perhaps beyond, depending on progress in vaccine development and distribution.

In 2020, all across the research system in Ireland, research teams adapted to working in new ways, with discussions taking place on virtual forums that provided a welcome space to share and challenge ideas. Depending on the discipline, some researchers were able to continue their projects with relatively minor disruption, perhaps working at a desk at home instead of in a school or research institute. In other disciplines, where access to library resources or laboratory or other specialist facilities is essential to progress the research, the impact was more dramatic.

Nevertheless, in all cases, the overnight move to remote working, and the loss of opportunities to bounce around ideas informally and share the highs and lows of research, reflects a dramatic alteration of the research process and experience. This reduction in informal interaction and communication has inevitably affected early career researchers – PhD students and postdoctoral researchers – at a critical point in their careers.

Clearly, where access to library collections or artefacts elsewhere is a central element of researchers' projects, the capacity to progress their research is severely limited for now. And the impact is disproportionately serious for early career researchers, who are at a crucial part of their career, and where postponing a visit for a year may not be feasible due to their funding timescale.

Reduced mobility

One of the principal negative impacts experienced by early career researchers is on their mobility and their opportunity to spend time with other research teams internationally, undertaking key

The Impact of the Pandemic on Early Career Researchers

How researchers have been affected by Covid-19-related travel constraints and other issues



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Vice President
for Research &
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College Cork

“For early career researchers, the impacts of COVID-19 on mobility is a significant concern, and very unsettling in the context of finding their career path.”

experiments and learning new approaches. Spending three months in a leading international team can be a career-defining opportunity for early career researchers, especially PhD students who take up employment on graduation and do not remain in academia. This is their sole opportunity to see how research operates in other environments.

In my experience, most early career researchers who undertake an international placement come back pleasantly surprised at the effectiveness of the Irish research system. This, in itself, is an important learning! The networks they develop through short, 3-6-month exchanges often stay with them for their whole career. Opportunities to travel that are supported by the European Commission, Fulbright, and other programmes can be critical in shaping their subsequent career.

While it is clear that the current travel restrictions affect all researchers, for established investigators this is a temporary issue; in time, they will be able to reach out again to visit colleagues internationally. For early career researchers, however, there is a critical narrow window of just a few years when they have opportunities to develop their expertise, grow their network, and establish competitive CVs. The impacts on mobility for this group, at the very point in their career when they are carefully planning next steps with an eye on long-term goals, is a significant concern, and very unsettling in the context of a career path where it can be difficult to anticipate what, when, and where future opportunities might open up.

Early career researchers typically plan how they will develop their research careers in terms of both time and location – moving to specific places to gain specific expertise or undertake specific experiments. Disruption of these plans due to the pandemic is enormously unsettling for them.

Though employment has continued throughout the closure, their inability to undertake specific elements of research, especially time-sensitive elements, is likely to affect their research outputs, including publications.

Many of our young researchers were close to completing their current contracts and were anticipating moving to other research teams internationally as a key next step in their careers. This path is now on hold depending on location, and for researchers with families the challenge is even greater.

The travel restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have also impacted on the mobility of more experienced researchers in tenured academic positions. For these researchers, however, it is a temporary disruption: what does not happen in 2020 will likely happen a year or two later. For early career researchers, the opportunity may be lost completely if travel in 2020 is missed.

It is also important to note that the need for universities to pivot their teaching missions to online and blended learning has significantly increased the workload of more senior researchers and academics. This affects the time they have available to work with research teams and to mentor early career researchers through these unprecedented challenges.

Impact on informal interactions

Travelling to conferences is a key aspect of a research career. It is fair to say that many of us were amazed at how effectively the research community has migrated to online conferences and seminars as an alternative mechanism for sharing research results, while saving hours that would have been spent getting to the locations. One of the positive outcomes of the pandemic is the hope that we embrace the advantages of the virtual environment for certain meetings even when it is no longer essential, thus facilitating much greater participation at events and conferences.

But there is a downside. Often the most valuable part of meetings and conferences is not the formal part – the contents, lectures, and presentations – but the informal discussions that happen over coffee before and after the meeting, the unintended exchanges where serendipity brings opportunity that cannot be orchestrated remotely. It seems to me that this is the strongest rationale for returning to international travel after Covid-19.

The planned communications and the transactional elements of research interactions can be conducted effectively in a virtual environment, but it is not possible to orchestrate unplanned side conversations and chance encounters, which are often the most valuable elements of international engagements. Opportunities are created by finding someone with a complementary expertise that catalyses you to look at something in a completely different way. The challenges to one's thinking, the opening of new opportunities in travelling to a meeting or seminar: I fail to see how these can be reproduced effectively online.

“ Often the most valuable part of meetings and conferences is the informal discussions that happen over coffee...”

It is important to acknowledge and welcome the flexibility offered by funding agencies that enables researchers to adjust budgets to facilitate no-cost extensions, together with other initiatives that provide funding for costed extensions for awards. In many cases, this flexibility will allow early career researchers to complete important elements of their projects, publish their results, and mitigate, to some extent, the impacts of the pandemic and the associated closure and travel restrictions.

Gender dimension

There remain many elements that cannot be readily addressed. For example, researchers with young children or other caring responsibilities were unable to work remotely, and though access to labs and so on was possible after a few months, in many cases childcare facilities were closed for much longer. International evidence increasingly highlights the gendered aspect of these challenges, which have their greatest impacts on researchers at an early career stage.

Given enough notice, most researchers could have planned effectively for two or three months of desk work from home. But the sudden unanticipated closure did not provide the luxury of planning ahead. So, while many early career researchers were able to focus on writing papers or analysing data, for others the closure happened at a time when they were unable to use their time as productively. Acknowledging the different individual experiences at this time is very important in supporting our research community.

Researcher careers moving forward

What can be done to support our early career researchers and minimise the impact of the pandemic on their future careers? A key intervention is the delivery of effective mentorship by those in leadership positions – watching out for opportunities where each researcher can be supported in achieving their career goals, albeit via a potentially altered path in a post-Covid-19 world.

“ Researchers with young children were unable to work remotely, and though access to labs was possible after a few months, childcare facilities were closed for much longer.”

In the coming years, evaluating the CVs of early career researchers as part of selection committees or grant review panels must be done through the lens of the pandemic and its ramifications. The question must be asked: Was the productivity of an early career researcher impacted by the constraints imposed by the pandemic? There may be merit in allowing them to articulate the impacts of the pandemic on their experience when applying for positions or funding opportunities, mirroring the way that parental leave is taken into consideration in many competitions today.

Whatever steps are taken to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on our early career researcher community, it is essential that they are identified quickly and implemented effectively, not only to protect the next generation of research leaders but also to help ensure the future effectiveness of the research and innovation ecosystem. Our ability to stave off the worst effects of the next pandemic depend on it.



The Education Awards recognise, encourage and celebrate excellence in the third level education sector on the island of Ireland from both State and privately funded institutions.

Research Education Awards Judge Robert Farrell presents the Best Green Campus Award 2020 to Professor Paula Murphy, Registrar, Trinity College Dublin

The school closures period from March to June 2020 was a unique experience in the history of Irish second-level education, forcing new, remote methods of pedagogical delivery. This article explores some key areas of impact – principally changes to teaching and learning approaches and decreases in student engagement and well-being. The continued circulation and virulence of Covid-19 means that disruptions to education remain a strong possibility, requiring robust contingency planning and flexibility.

Government-mandated closures of school facilities on 12 March 2020, necessitated by the Covid-19 public health emergency, represented a watershed moment for school communities across Ireland. Overnight, the educational setting for 723 second-level schools changed from the classroom to a home-based environment. The suddenness of the transition, the absence of opportunity to prepare, and the uncertainty over student assessment, particularly with the changing decisions on the Leaving Cert exams as the pandemic deepened, were a challenge for all concerned. This extraordinary period undoubtedly presented some of the greatest trials for our educators and students, yet it has also broken new ground in approaches to education, particularly in the use of technology for remote and independent learning.

Overall, teachers were swift to respond to the disruption, rapidly adapting, innovating, and creating distance-learning solutions to bridge the gap between school and home over a three-month period. However, not all teachers and students had equal access to 'new' pedagogical modalities due to differences in broadband connectivity, access to technological devices, and digital literacy. Student engagement and motivation were also impacted. Perhaps of greatest concern has been the profound effect on student (and staff) well-being arising from teaching and learning in an atmosphere of global crisis and the loss of in-person connection facilitated by school premises. These problems have been more acute for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs. As schools have now reopened, it is important to take stock and identify lessons from this momentous era as we continue to live, operate, and educate alongside Covid-19.

Post-Primary Pedagogy in a Pandemic

Second-level education during Covid-19 building closures



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Teaching and learning at a distance

In an official statement issued on the day that school buildings were shuttered, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2020) outlined:

Schools will be asked to continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons. ... Schools are asked to be conscious of students that may not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their response.

In rising to the challenge of maintaining a continuity of education for their students, teachers rallied to upskill their digital competencies in a short period, typically working longer hours and engaging in peer-to-peer learning in the early weeks of the closures. The use of virtual learning environments, online education platforms, and tools varied from school to school, with Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and Zoom being popular choices. Most schools communicated with pupils via email, and provided materials, resources, and assignments to students via online channels. Some schools organised real-time video streaming of lessons in a bid to mimic the usual timetable, though this was more common in private schools (Devitt et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that schools with prior experiences of embedding technology in education, such as 'iPad schools', had a smoother transition to distance learning during the pandemic (Devitt et al., 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

“ Evidence suggests that schools with prior experiences of embedding technology in education had a smoother transition to distance learning during the pandemic.

While the use of digital technologies in education, and the value placed on them, soared under the lockdown, online options were not available for all teachers and learners. A digital divide was reported by more than half of second-level school principals in one study (Mohan et al., 2020). This reflected a deficiency of access or of adequacy of broadband connectivity, based on geographical location or economic factors, as well as a lack of digital devices, and hampered the ability of some to engage with schoolwork remotely. Many schools tried to provide digital equipment to those in need, supported by additional DES funding for this purpose. But schools were forced to prioritise some groups, such as exam-year students or students from low-income backgrounds, which meant that universal coverage was typically not achieved. Some teachers deployed 'offline' channels such as telephone and post to communicate with students (and parents); this was more prevalent in DEIS schools.

More broadly, the home environment has been reported as not conducive to learning for some students, particularly those in less privileged circumstances, where they lacked a quiet space or desk to study and were competing with other domestic demands and adversities (Bray et al., 2020). Across the world, concerns have been expressed that school closures may have amplified existing educational inequalities. Teachers themselves also encountered difficulties in meeting the demands of work and home life.

Despite best efforts, for many second-level students, a reduction in instructional contact with their teachers, particularly one-to-one contact, was a consequence of the move from the traditional classroom to remote settings. The negative impact of this is especially pronounced for students with special educational needs. The ability to conduct practical work all

but ceased, while group work or collaboration among students on a remote basis was limited.

Initially, the DES emphasised that distance education efforts should focus on year groups which were due to sit State exams. The cancellation of the Junior Cert, and the subsequent cancellation of the Leaving Cert, replaced by a calculated grades system, reduced the imperative of preparing for national assessments of these groups. For the rest of the school body, assessment outside the classroom varied, but evidence indicates that the use of final presentations was most commonly reported for first and second years, while for third and fifth years open-books exams were often used (Mohan et al., 2020).

Student engagement and motivation

The longer-term impacts of the school closures on learning loss and academic performance are yet to be established, but the more immediate impact on student engagement was palpable. The effects were especially marked among Leaving and Junior Cert students as well as students in DEIS schools. The loss of extrinsic motivation from the cancellation of exams was the primary explanation for student disengagement.

More generally, a number of barriers to student engagement over the period were identified: teachers reported that student attendance and engagement with schooling suffered due to a lack of interest on students' part, limited support from their home (particularly for students of DEIS schools), and technological obstacles (Devitt et al., 2020). The use of assessment with feedback as a mode of teaching delivery was found to be important in maintaining higher levels of student engagement, and instruction via live video also fostered greater participation. On a positive note, teachers reported that some students acquired greater skills in independent learning, improved their digital competencies, and showed greater creativity.

“ The home environment has been reported as not conducive to learning for some students, particularly those in less privileged circumstances.

Well-being

The Covid-19 outbreak itself and the loss of the physical school community have taken a toll on the well-being of students. While schools are a learning place, they also provide a vital space for daily social interactions with friends, peers, teachers, and wider staff. The broader life of the school, the structure and purpose of the school day, and non-curricular activities all contribute to the growth and development of children and young people, which were sorely missed over the duration of closures. Principals reported that the pastoral role of schools was the most difficult thing to replicate remotely, though most schools strove to provide guidance counselling and well-being supports, and to maintain the free school meals programme where applicable. Regular extracurricular activities and physical education fell by the wayside for many, though schools tried to maintain some sense of school spirit through initiatives such as online competitions, quizzes, and supportive videos.

In a longitudinal study from schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Dublin, Bray et al. (2020) found a deterioration in student well-being in 2020 relative to 2019. Students reported higher levels of stress, attributing these to a perceived increase in workload, a lack of or reduced feedback from teachers, and less connection with peers.

Going forward

While a full return to school attendance in the traditional classroom setting has broadly been achieved, the changes brought about as part of the new circumstances are daunting for some. Since the Covid-19 health crisis appears far from over, and the potential for disruption of education prevails, resilience of school systems requires flexibility in approaches to teaching, and greater considerations of equity and inclusivity. Schools have a duty of care for all students, and extra provisions, drawing on additional resources, existing networks, and nurturing relationships, are especially needed for those struggling with classwork and well-being.

“ One fortuitous upshot may be that of a more future-ready, technology-embracing education system.

The potential for learning gaps to widen between students from more and less privileged backgrounds, and between those with and without access to the required technologies during the shutdown, will need to be examined, and measures to mitigate such inequalities will need to be prioritised.

Somewhat serendipitously, the crisis has led to a newfound appreciation of the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for education, expanding schools' repertoires of learning approaches. To fully seize the opportunities provided by technology, teachers and students need to be supported in developing their digital skills, which may serve to safeguard education in the event of further closures. Digital exclusion at the home level remains problematic, but schools can play a role in bridging the divide. Like many sectors of society, the full ramifications of the pandemic period for education are yet to be realised, though one fortuitous upshot may be that of a more future-ready, technology-embracing education system.

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Putting research evidence into practice is high on the contemporary policy agenda, but we still know relatively little about how best to put research findings into practice – and into policies guiding practice. This article looks at current ideas and approaches in this area and points to future policy directions.

Introduction

Putting research evidence into practice is high on the list of priorities on the contemporary policy agenda. Although considered a desirable goal of educational reform both internationally (Malin et al., 2020) and in the Irish context, it is not without controversy or debate (Brown and Zhang, 2017). We still know relatively little about how best to put research findings not only into practice but also into policies guiding such practices (Gorard et al., 2020). This creates challenges for policymakers and practitioners alike.

It is now widely purported that informing practice with research evidence, broadly conceived, can help us figure out challenges we face as education professionals rather than simply relying on hunch, intuition, or experience alone. Common-sense use of research evidence (Gordon and Conaway, 2020) helps us surmount such challenges in more reasonable ways, even if it is not always conclusive.

Lingard and Gale (2010, p. 23) urge that ‘all education practitioners, policy makers and teachers, should be interested in research and knowledge production and see themselves as participants in the field of educational research broadly defined. Educational professionals should be research-informed, but also research-informing.’ This inclusive position – one emphasising the importance of what they call a ‘researchly disposition’ – dissolves the often-divisive practice and research evidence boundaries, seeing them as porous and mutually constitutive.

A classic definition of research is ‘systematic enquiry made public’ (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 104). Brooks et al. (2017) suggest that evidence is broader than research but not limited to data, highlighting that quality of evidence ought to be judged in connection with its intended use. Brown and Zhang (2017, p. 383) describe evidence as ‘a combination of practitioner expertise and knowledge of the best external research, and evaluation-based evidence’.

Putting Research Evidence into Practice

Policy directions and professional futures



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In these definitions, pluralistic ideas abound about engagement with, use of, and generation of research evidence. They reflect what has been learnt from global contexts where systems had become too technocratic, too narrowly focused on data, where they offered too little agency to teachers or leaders pursuing research or enquiry, and where quality use of evidence has not been sufficiently considered (see Monash University’s Q Project).

Brown et al. (2017) note that engaging with research evidence guards against automatic judgements, informs critical thinking, and promotes sense-making. Conaway (2019, p. 7) writes that ‘the research community’s contribution operates as much through its structured approach to learning as through any specific knowledge it generates’. Researching, at the desk or in the field, therefore helps us to learn: to wonder, to question, to examine similar as well as alternative perspectives, to critique, to theorise, and to be or act with greater purpose and in a more informed manner in our practice and more expansive consideration of challenges encountered in practice. Research done well, conducted ethically and with care, helps those of us engaged in its generation or who use its results in our professional practice (or both) to do good in and for the communities we serve as educators.

“Engaging with research evidence guards against automatic judgements, informs critical thinking, and promotes sense-making. (Brown et al.)”

De Paor and Murphy’s (2018) conclusions about teachers’ views on research as a model of professional learning in Ireland are also important to mention. De Paor and Murphy identified two main issues when teachers engage with, use, or generate research through professional learning activity: (1) assuring and empowering teachers to ensure it is relevant, and (2) the necessity to provide more support, particularly when generating research, although lessons can also be learnt for engagement and use of research.

Policy directions

Observations of note include, but are not limited to:

- establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- Department of Education and Skills’ (DES) cornerstone framework ‘Looking at Our Schools’ and the process of school self-evaluation (SSE), involving evidence-gathering and evidence-based planning
- Centre for Effective Services: ‘Using data to inform decision-making in education’ with the DES
- Teaching Council’s CROÍ (Collaboration and Research for Ongoing Innovation), *Using Research In Our School* resource, FÉILTE, Cosán
- Teachers’ Research Exchange (T-REX)
- Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland (NEARI)
- Centre for School Leadership, and its Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership, with focus on professional enquiry connected to ‘Looking at Our Schools’ and SSE
- reform of initial teacher education and the notable use of research in compound forms, such as research-rich environment, research-based approaches, research capacity, student research, and research-based profession, in Sahlberg (2019)
- Student Teacher Educational Research (STER)

- Economic and Social Research Institute
- Educational Research Centre
- activities in Education Centres
- ResearchEd Dublin
- private data analytics companies, such as companies that help schools to interpret assessment and tracking data.

In perusing documents connected to the above, many terminologies – all centred on varying ways of putting research into practice, and practice into research – are clear, including: reflective practice; self-study; action or practitioner research; evidence-informed, evidence-based, or inquiry-led practices; data and decision-making; and improvement science (such as plan, do, study, act cycles) embedded in networked improvement communities.

Although it is not the primary focus of this article, it is important to flag these different approaches to putting research into practice (and, as I have implied, practice into research). As Dyson (2020) states: ‘The existence of different versions of inquiry, with different traditions, is rarely acknowledged. Each of these traditions has a distinct approach, pointing to two important observations: there is no singular approach to putting research evidence into practice; and there is a nuance of values between each approach. Putting research into practice is not just a prescriptive or technical task, because value systems frame its conduct, including our own values as researchers and the values of the tradition from which particular approaches to enquiry emanate.’

“ We should ensure continued focus on improving the educational infrastructure to foster engagement, use, and generation of research. ”

Professional futures

It is worth considering how we are ‘adopting and adapting’ (Young et al., 2018) in order to determine our professional future and not to let the act of putting research into practice become too narrow, burdensomely technocratic, or accountability-driven (reflecting what Gorard et al. (2020) term policy-based evidence making). Taking this route would likely squander the generative opportunities presented by these policy advances to enhance professional learning and would miss the opportunity to enhance the profession’s status.

Therefore, in planning for our professional future, I argue that we should:

- carefully consider the various traditions of research highlighted above, and question sources of research that we consume carefully
- be explicit about the role that values play in putting research into practice
- work to promote time, space, and joined-up thinking about, and focus on, putting research into practice across initial teacher education, induction, mentoring, professional learning, school leadership preparation and development, and coaching
- ensure continued focus on improving the educational infrastructure to foster engagement, use, and generation of research

- demonstrate system leadership that is imaginative, focused on the developmental potential of putting research into practice, and subscribes to promoting and supporting professional agency
- display committed, courageous, curious, and supportive school leadership practices spanning system, senior, middle, and teacher leaders who demonstrate a ‘researchly’ disposition
- foster reimagined opportunities for teachers and school leaders within and beyond their schools to take up roles focused on research collaboratively in teams, rather than the tokenistic solo research lead role common in many educational organisations
- adopt a renewed vigour and purpose, particularly but not singularly because of Covid-19, to focus on issues of equity as well as excellence when putting research into practice.

Conclusion

I concur with the (inter)national moves that perceive research-informed practice as desirable. I am nonetheless aware that there are many challenges to achieving this ideal, and I suggest that – as it stands – how our professional future is determined is up for grabs. With the considerations highlighted here, I argue that it is up to those of us working in and alongside the profession to determine this ‘researchly’ future, to ensure it is in our best interests – but fundamentally in the best interests of those we work with and serve.

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Irish Diaspora Leaders receive SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal in Washington DC



l-r: Prof Mark Ferguson, Director General of SFI and Chief Scientific Adviser to the Government of Ireland, with Prof Neville J Hogan, Sun Jae Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Professor of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Dr Ann B Kelleher, Senior Vice President and General Manager at Intel, both recipients of the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal for their significant scientific contributions to academia and industry.

On 11 March 2020, in Washington DC, the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal was awarded to Prof Neville Hogan, MIT Robotics Pioneer, and Dr Ann Kelleher, Intel Senior Vice President and General Manager, in recognition of their outstanding contributions to academia and industry.

Now in its seventh year, the SFI St Patrick's Day Science Medal is awarded annually to US-based scientists, engineers or technology leaders with strong Irish connections, as chosen by an independent selection committee. The Medal recognises Prof Hogan and Dr Kelleher's significant roles in supporting and engaging with the research ecosystem in Ireland.

"I am honoured to accept the SFI St Patrick's Day Academic Medal, which not only recognises my work, but also the strong Irish connections across the research community in the U.S., Professor Hogan said.

"Working at the forefront of robotics to progress knowledge

and discovery with the potential to transform our societies and economies, I am very proud of my Irish roots. The strong Irish commitment to education is a major factor in the success of Irish people everywhere.

Welcoming her award, Dr Ann B Kelleher said:

"I am honoured to accept the SFI St Patrick's Day Industry Medal for my work at Intel. I am a firm advocate for industry collaboration between Ireland and the United States, given my career with Intel began in Leixlip. The benefits and positive impact of this collaborative relationship are considerable. This is evidenced by the long and fruitful collaborative research engagement between Tyndall, multiple SFI Research Centres and US multinationals.



Provost Dr Patrick Prendergast launches the Trinity Education project, an undergraduate curriculum for the 21st century.



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Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

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An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
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