

Editorial



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Education Yearbook

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.

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.