

Overview of Second Level

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



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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.

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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

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 reimagined if the work experience and community placement are to be retained.

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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

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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.

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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

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