

Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021



Ireland's Education Yearbook **2021**

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Editorial

A Christmas surprise of a very different kind

One year ago, Taoiseach Micheál Martin wrote in this publication that 2020 had been 'a year of dramatic and unprecedented challenges for our country, Europe, and the world as a whole'. It was a year, he wrote, when his government had 'put in place the foundations for a new era in Irish education' by creating 'a separate government department with responsibility for higher education, further education and research'.

Little did the Taoiseach know when he wrote those words that within weeks, a surge in Covid-19 infections would close all schools and colleges for a further three months until Easter, leaving online learning as the sole method of teaching and learning for the vast majority. The effects of this enforced closure on all sectors of our education system are outlined in great detail in this, the 2021 edition of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* by Education Matters.

Parents found themselves in most cases both working from home and overseeing their children's online education. Teachers at all levels showed a selfless commitment to their students and their profession. In my role as chair of the board of management of a number of colleges, I heard from teacher and lecturer representatives of the 24/7 nature of their work during the first half of 2021.

Students working at different hours of the day and night submitted work and questions at 2 a.m. or later, then followed up at 9 a.m. the same morning enquiring about the delay in receiving a reply. In most cases teachers and lecturers facilitated their students, understanding that they too were struggling to manage their learning in this new environment.

Notwithstanding the huge challenges involved, assessment methods across all sectors were reimagined; exams took place in many different formats to enable the vast majority of students to progress to the next appropriate stage of their education. We have learnt many valuable lessons from the transformation of our education system over the past two years.

Early childhood education

Having left the development of our early childhood education and care system effectively to the private sector since its inception, we discovered that almost overnight we could instigate a virtual



Dr Brian Mooney
Editor of Ireland's
Education Yearbook

nationalisation of the service, to enable it to continue on life support for the duration of the lockdown, so that its staff would still be available to reopen when circumstances allowed.

This experience provided the evidence base for the Minister with responsibility for early childhood education and care, Roderic O’Gorman, to bring forward the potentially transformational proposals which he has outlined in his article for this publication. State funding to the sector will increase to €1 billion a year within six years, allowing significant reduction in fees for parents in the future, and well-paid salaries for staff working with young children.

Under the reforms, the sector will move from a predominantly private model to a new hybrid model that will be increasingly publicly funded and publicly managed, with the professionalisation of childcare workers and educators, which would result in a graduate-led workforce by 2028.

If these proposals are acted upon – and I know they have the support of the Taoiseach, who as a former teacher understands the importance of building the foundations of a high-quality education system from early years upwards – they will result in the most important advance in education for all children since the introduction of free second-level education by Donogh O’Malley in 1966.

“In most cases teachers and lecturers facilitated their students, understanding that they too were struggling to manage their learning in this new environment.”

Supporting our most vulnerable children

Another important lesson learnt from the Covid-19 experience, across both our primary and post-primary sectors, was the extent to which children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds experienced a far greater loss of learning than those from more privileged backgrounds.

Even though schools actively reached out and supported these children, providing them with electronic devices to enable them to engage in online learning, food parcels for their families to support their nutritional needs, and home visits by appropriate school personnel, while observing all pandemic protocols, the lack of the meaningful connectivity of face-to-face classroom engagement deeply affected these vulnerable children.

Hopefully we now value our schools in a way we did not before Covid-19 and no longer take what they do on a daily basis somewhat for granted. It is also clearly evident that one of the unavoidable consequences of the closures of schools for such long periods is the mountain of mental health challenges for our children, which will need dedicated resourcing in the immediate future as we hopefully emerge from the pandemic.

Primary education developments

While we survived the pandemic, work has continued on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, putting flesh on the bones of what the Taoiseach outlined in his article last year: giving increased time for Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE), Coding and Computational Thinking, and Wellbeing, reintroducing Modern

Continental Languages, broadening Arts education, and increasing the focus on technology.

How all of this will fit into the existing school day is another challenge. Some aspects of the current curriculum will have to forfeit time to allow for the expansions proposed. The question is: Which ones?

The Leaving Certificate and CAO points requirements

At second level the focus in 2021 was on the extension of the ‘assessed grades’ process for a further year. Following pressure from representatives of students who uniquely had a seat at the decision table, the Leaving Cert class of 2021 had the option of accepting the higher of the two grades received from either their teacher’s assessed grade or the actual grade they secured in the Leaving Cert exams that took place in June 2021.

As it transpired, 60 per cent of the grades that students secured were assessed grades where the grade awarded was at least a grade higher than what the student secured in their written paper. The result was a surge in students’ performance. In 2019, the last year the Leaving Cert took place under traditional circumstances, a little over 200 students secured the maximum 625 CAO points; in 2021 the figure was 1,343. Traditionally, around 1,500 students normally achieve 600 CAO points and above. In 2021, 3,500 students did.

The increased CAO points requirements saw four level 8 degree programmes require 625 points, and the random-selection mechanism led to some of these students failing to secure an offer in their preferred programme. The concern going forward, particularly for those sitting the Leaving Cert in 2022, is that up to 10,000 of the class of 2021, plus several thousand of the class of 2020 – all of whom have higher points than they might have achieved pre-Covid-19 – will apply for places through the CAO in 2022.

How will this overhang of higher Leaving Cert scores affect CAO points requirements in 2022? And specifically, how can fairness be ensured for those sitting the Leaving Cert this year? There are no obvious and easy solutions to these questions.

The changing face of our third-level system and its student body

In higher education, we had a cohort of students who returned to campuses tentatively in September 2021. For all first and most second years, it was their first time setting foot in their college. For third-year students, most of them had left their lecture halls in early March 2020, just as they started their second-semester lectures.

What will be the long-term consequences of such a break in the traditional transmission of the culture of institutions, both academically and socially, including for the many clubs and societies that play a vital role in the formation of our undergraduate student population? Will we ever see the return of the 500-seater lecture again, or will all such activity migrate online, leaving face-to-face work to tutorials and laboratory activities?

The effect of Brexit on where students choose to study

An unforeseen consequence of Brexit has been the huge increase in the number of students from Continental Europe who traditionally would have sought places in UK universities applying for CAO places in 2021. Unlike Irish students, who enjoy the benefit of the same fees as UK students due to the common travel area arrangements (£9,250), Continental students are now charged international fees in the UK, which can be between £30,000 and £40,000.

The number of Continental applicants to the CAO increased from 2,229 to 5,256 in 2021. Over 2,200 of them secured a CAO offer, 43 per cent of whom accepted a place, representing 870 of this year's undergraduate intake in Irish third-level colleges. The equivalent number of Continental student acceptances in 2020 was a little over 300.

While a growing number of Continental students are discovering the joy of studying in Ireland, an even greater number of Irish students are heading in the opposite direction. This year almost a thousand Irish students registered for the first year of their degree programme in the Netherlands. Several hundred more accepted places in colleges throughout the EU.

Whereas these numbers, which I estimate at currently around 1,350, and growing exponentially every year, appear lower than the 2,210 Republic of Ireland-based applicants who accepted a place in a British or Northern Irish university in 2021, 850 of that number were students living in the border counties who sought and secured places in their local universities on the Northern Ireland side of the border. Of the remaining applicants who crossed the water to the UK, 460 attended Scottish universities and 900 became first-year undergraduates in English and Welsh universities.

“ This year almost a thousand Irish students registered for the first year of their degree programme in the Netherlands.”

This year therefore marks the moment when the flow of students from Ireland to the UK is far exceeded by the numbers heading to degree programmes taught through English in EU Continental universities, where fees and accommodation costs are a fraction of what they are in both the UK and Ireland. The answer to Mary Harney's famous question about whether our affinity was with Boston or Berlin may be changing rapidly, driven in large part by Brexit.

Why don't we teach our children about our membership of the EU?

Given Ireland's growing integration into the European Union, why is it that our education system at all levels pays so little attention to the actual working of the Union? Do our children, or adults for that matter, understand the extent to which the legislative processes in Brussels and Strasbourg generate more domestic legislation than our own Dáil and Seanad Éireann?

A healthy democracy demands that citizens understand the processes that govern their lives. The growth and development of the EU is, in my opinion, a very positive force in all our lives – but it can be undermined, as we saw in the UK with Brexit, if citizens do not fully understand its workings. We need

to build into our education system a comprehensive programme on how the Union of which we are willing members operates.

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

As the Taoiseach outlined in the 2020 *Yearbook*, the most radical educational development of 2020 was his establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Its first secretary general, Jim Breslin, has written a comprehensive overview of its goals over the coming years in the present *Yearbook* and has outlined the challenges ahead for this sector.

It is far too early to pass judgement on this initiative, as the Department is in its infancy and only finding its feet. But its proposals to transform further education, apprenticeships, and traineeships will lead to major challenges in the years ahead, both for it and for SOLAS, with whom it works on this part of its brief.

The value to society of high-quality academic research

Alongside this editorial you will find a reflective piece by Dr Philip Nolan, the recently retired president of Maynooth University, better known to us all as the chair of NPHET's Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group for the past two years. He and his colleagues have worked night and day to protect us from the ravages of Covid-19, and as a nation we owe him and all his colleagues an eternal debt of gratitude.

His observation that Ireland's national research funding systems 'must be designed to support the full range of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, science, and engineering' is one we must all take heed of. It is often only in times of crisis that we truly value those who research new knowledge across all disciplines for our mutual benefit. Hopefully the government will remember this when deciding on the levels of funding and support to our higher education and research system in the coming years.

Acknowledgements

May I take this opportunity to again thank my wife, Teresa, for her forbearance and understanding of my continued active engagement in Irish education in so many roles for almost 50 years.

A special word of thanks also to my colleague Phyllis Mitchell, founder and publisher of Ireland's Education Yearbook.

I have the deepest appreciation for the work of all my colleagues in Education Matters who ensure the quality of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*, our writers and authors, our editorial boards in each sector, our sponsors, and our advertisers, without whom we could not operate, and finally and most importantly, you, our readers.

May all of us travel safely through the remainder of the current pandemic, and may our education system at all levels emerge stronger from the travails it has endured over the past two years.

It is a privilege for me to write for *Ireland's Education Yearbook* published by Education Matters as we sit on the cusp of major reform through the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector.

As with so many areas of society, the pandemic has highlighted the value of early learning and childcare. Professionals in the sector have gone above and beyond to ensure that children remain supported throughout the pandemic. Yet challenges persist. With low wages, many professionals working in the sector do not see a future for themselves in it; services are struggling to recruit and retain staff; and fees are unaffordable for many parents.

It is clear to me that these issues cannot be addressed in isolation, and that our response as a government must address them all in a coherent and interconnected way.

We have now set about that process of reform with two major reports published and approved by government in December 2021: 'Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare' and 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare'. Each represents the culmination of more than two years of work, and they set out the way forward for fundamental building blocks of the sector – the funding model and the workforce.

Partnership for the Public Good is the report of an independently chaired expert group to develop a new funding model. The group drew on detailed research, data, and other inputs which have been published throughout the process. This rigour clearly underpins all of the group's analysis and conclusions and hugely strengthens the report. It gives me great confidence and assurance about the recommendations arrived at.

Consultation and engagement with those involved in the sector – parents, workers, providers, and others – were other key ingredients in the success of this report. An iterative approach was taken over three phases, which started with seeking perspectives from a wide range of contributors and progressively became more detailed and specific, with a key reference group of representative groups and other stakeholders. This careful balancing of different views and interests comes across very clearly in the report.

The overarching theme of the report is reflected in the title: Partnership for the Public Good. It clearly and unequivocally recognises that early

Introduction



Roderic O'Gorman TD
Minister for Children,
Equality, Disability,
Integration, and Youth

learning and childcare serves the public good – for children, for families, and for society and the economy more widely. These are crucial services, and the State has a strong interest in ensuring they are high-quality, affordable, inclusive, and sustainable. And this has to be achieved through a relationship of partnership with providers, working together for the public good. This emphasis marks a new departure for the State's approach in the sector.

While acknowledging the many positives in the sector, the report does not shy away from the challenges: low pay, high fees, low investment, and the impact of market-driven approaches. But it provides a clear direction for how these issues can be addressed.

Central to the expert group's recommendations is that a new supply-side approach to investment should be developed: core funding. Core funding is key to resolving the most challenging aspects of the current system and offers a new basis on which to build partnership between the State and providers. The group recommends building on core funding with additional funding and supports, both targeted and universal, to tackle disadvantage.

We have already set in motion this funding-model reform. 2022 will see a transformative and groundbreaking package of measures introduced to begin to implement the vision set out in the group's report. €78 million is being made available to enable this, including €69 million for a core funding stream, equivalent to €207 million in a full year. Core funding will support the establishment of an employment regulation order to improve pay and conditions in the sector, ensure stability and sustainability for services, improve quality of provision, and freeze parental fees so that the full affordability benefits of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) can be realised.

“The report does not shy away from the challenges: low pay, high fees, low investment, and the impact of market-driven approaches.”

The new funding elements – core funding and funding to tackle disadvantage – are designed to operate alongside the ECCE programme and the NCS, with developments to both, to make up an integrated and reinforcing model of funding to deliver a range of policy objectives. Full details of this new model are described in the report.

The initial implementation of core funding from 2022 is the start of a transformational change, and what I hope will be a multi-annual programme of investment to substantially increase public funding for early learning and care and school-age childcare. In addition to supporting quality developments and service sustainability, the new funding model will also make early learning and childcare substantially more affordable for families. Core funding will enable the introduction of a fee management system which, in tandem with developments to the NCS, will significantly reduce out-of-pocket costs for parents. Fee management will start with a requirement for providers not to increase fees on September 2021 levels. The fee management system will be further developed in subsequent years.

Having met so many early learning and childcare providers and professionals, I know the dedication and care they devote to their job. They deserve recognition for the work they do, and a career pathway for the job they love. That is why I have launched Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early

Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028. It complements the expert group's report on the funding model, because the workforce – early years educators, school-age childcare practitioners, and childminders – are the very heart of the services with which government works in partnership.

While funding is critical, it is those working in the sector – supporting children's development, learning, and well-being, working in partnership with families – who ensure that early learning and childcare bring so many benefits. They do not yet receive the recognition they deserve. Unfortunately, many continue to leave the sector because they do not see a future for themselves in it. The Covid-19 pandemic has compounded the challenges and pressures in a sector that has shown consistent dedication in its work with children and families.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to early years educators, school-age childcare practitioners, and childminders at this time, when the pandemic is causing so much disruption, stress, and worry. Those working in this sector have made an enormous contribution, and I would like to acknowledge that. They deserve public recognition for their commitment and their professionalism.

Nurturing Skills aims to build on that professionalism and actively support the workforce in continuing its professional journey. The actions it sets out provide a roadmap for the next steps in the workforce's journey towards professionalisation. Key actions include:

- new financial supports to assist early years educators to study while continuing to work in the sector
- supporting school-age childcare practitioners to meet new qualification requirements that will be introduced incrementally over the coming years
- supporting staff recruitment, retention, and diversity in the workforce.

Actions to develop career pathways and support staff recruitment will complement efforts under way to improve pay and conditions of employment in the sector. In particular, a key enabler for Nurturing Skills will be the Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services, which was recently established following a process I began in December 2020.

Likewise, the core funding – announced in Budget 2022 and set out in Partnership for the Public Good – will support service providers to meet higher costs arising from pay increases, without raising fees for parents.

Together these reports will result in significant reform of the relationship between the State and the services and workers who are so critical in delivering high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare. Over the years ahead, they will strengthen the quality of provision, support affordability and access, and provide a new basis for ensuring that public investment in the sector works for the public good, working in partnership with service providers and their staff to support children and families.

“Those working in this sector have made an enormous contribution, and I would like to acknowledge that.”

Reflections on Two Years at War with Covid-19

This article offers personal and professional reflections on the role of science and research, in Ireland and internationally, as we have grappled with Covid-19. An important lesson the pandemic has taught us is that Ireland's national research funding systems must be designed to support the full range of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, science, and engineering.

Introduction

It is early September 2021, and I am returning to my office in Maynooth University for the first time since Friday 13 March 2020, having worked from home for 18 months. A newspaper lies on a table by a window, yellowed by the sun of two summers. It is the *Irish Times*, from that fateful Friday, the headline quoting the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD: 'We have not witnessed a pandemic of this nature in living memory. This is uncharted territory.'

Little did we know how true this was or comprehend what lay ahead of us. Schools and colleges were to close, and a wider set of public health restrictions were to apply for 19 days, until 29 March 2020, but the reportage at this point was already suggesting that educational establishments could close until Easter, and restrictions 'could remain in force for months'.

Today, as I write this reflection, is 3 December 2021, 643 days since we notified the first case of Covid-19 in Ireland on 29 February 2020. Up to midnight last night, we have confirmed 583,472 cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection, 20,655 of whom have been hospitalised and 2,197 admitted to intensive care. 5,743 people have sadly died.

The Taoiseach and cabinet grapple with the rapid growth of a fourth wave of infection, which is so large it threatens to overwhelm the defences offered by a vaccination programme that is unprecedented in its scale, speed, and effectiveness. A new variant, Omicron, emerges as a threat we cannot yet understand or quantify, and yet again the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, comes to a podium to tell a tired and frustrated nation that he has received 'some very stark advice from our Chief Medical Officer and our Public Health Experts that requires the reintroduction of a number of restrictions'.

The human, social, and economic cost of this pandemic has been extraordinary. Our lives have been damaged, disrupted, and transformed. And it is not over. It leaves us with much to grieve for, much to reflect on, and much to learn.



Prof Philip Nolan
Research Professor
and Past President,
Maynooth University,
and Chair of NPHET's
Irish Epidemiological
Modelling Advisory
Group

The value of science

There is no doubt that science and scientists have done us an extraordinary service during the pandemic. Knowledge and expertise built up over centuries were deployed in an unprecedented global effort to understand and mitigate the infection.

The first reported case developed symptoms on 17 December 2019. Twenty-five days later, on 11 January 2020, the sequence of the viral genome was published, allowing reliable diagnostic testing, and work to begin on the design of a vaccine. Almost a year later, on 21 December 2020, the European Medicines Agency recommended conditional marketing authorisation for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

As someone who trained in medicine in the 1980s, when genome sequencing was in its infancy and the development of an effective vaccine was a slow and fraught process, it is stunning that a safe, highly effective vaccine against a novel coronavirus was available just one year after the emergence of the virus. And this is just one example from a wide range of scientific and technological advances and applications that are bringing the virus under control, first mitigating its worst effects, reducing severe disease and mortality, and ultimately minimising transmission and infection.

It is also true that we have seen the scientific process, in all its messiness and complexity, play out in real time and in public. The disputes, debates, controversies, and paradigm shifts that are essential to the advancement of knowledge, which normally unfold within the confines of a given field, in its learned societies and journals, are now also transacted over the airwaves and on social media, with insufficient regard for the traditional boundaries of academic fields of expertise.

On the one hand, this has raised awareness of the power of science, or more comprehensively, research and scholarship, to address grand challenges. It has served to illustrate that questions in the natural, human, and social sciences are contested and unsettled, and that often there is no such thing as 'the science' to be followed by the policymaker.

However, there has also been a temptation for us as scientists to speak with too much certainty, to argue too strongly for our point of view, and for its urgent translation into policy. There is a danger that this leaves the public confused and concerned. It obscures a difficult reality that public health advice has had to be formulated, and policy decisions made, with extraordinary urgency based on scant and imperfect information.

A central problem in this pandemic has been the sheer volume of research generated, making it challenging, under emergency conditions, to separate the wheat from the chaff and establish an evidence base for policy decisions. This process normally takes years but is now done in weeks or days, in the full glare of the media spotlight.

Expertise and public service

My direct experience of this scientific and public health effort has left a deep impression on me. Early in the morning of Sunday 8 March 2020, the chief medical officer, Dr Tony Holohan, called me to ask if I would convene an

expert group to monitor and develop quantitative models of the likely course of the pandemic in Ireland. As he memorably put it: 'We've had sight of some very good modelling from the United Kingdom; but we can't just copy their homework, we need our own models adapted to our context.'

It is impossible to properly describe the quiet but essential public service that has been provided, for almost two years, by the dedicated team of applied mathematicians and modellers, computer scientists, statisticians, infectious disease epidemiologists, and public health specialists, which was convened over the next few days as the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group (IEMAG), and which grew to over 40 people. It is what it is: quiet, essential public service, the sort of public service that was replicated across so many sectors and that sustained us through some dark days.

This team, starting from nothing, built a set of models and analytic techniques to help the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and government think rigorously and quantitatively about how different actions and decisions might influence the course of the pandemic, models which performed very well compared to the best available internationally, and the more innovative aspects of the work have been published so that they can be used by others. They worked, and continue to work, nights and weekends over and above their teaching, research, and service work, to support NPHE and government.

It is also important to acknowledge the simple fact that we had this expertise available to us. It is an eclectic set of disciplines, and the talent we could call on was there because of broad investment in science over two decades to foster and retain that talent. It is an important reminder that national research funding systems must be designed to support the full range of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and science and engineering. They are valuable in themselves, and we can never fully anticipate the circumstances under which we might require a specific ability and expertise which, prior to the moment of crisis, might have appeared obscure, marginal, or inessential.

The wider response of students and staff across the education system fills me with admiration. We should hesitate to use words like *resilience*. The strain of these two years will have taken their toll on our minds and our bodies, and we will have pushed ourselves too far in our efforts to support our students right across the continuum from early childhood to postgraduate and lifelong learning.

Each sector has faced similar challenges but in widely differing and continually changing contexts. The challenges for, and the strains on, educators and educational leaders have been enormous. They deserve our gratitude. But they deserve more. When this is over, they deserve proper consideration of what has happened, and action by society and government to strengthen the system through investments in people, technology, and infrastructure, so that it can be genuinely resilient in facing future crises.

This applies across the full range of public services, not just health and education. When the history of this pandemic is written, I suspect that one conclusion will be that countries with strong public services, and with public trust in the good administration of government, will have fared better than those without.

One of the criticisms of NPHET that puzzles me was the assertion that there are too many civil servants. This is not my experience. The assertion fails to value the diverse professional experience, expertise, and capacities essential to a modern public service. The formulation and implementation of good public policy is a discipline and skill of its own, to be valued and respected, and different from the practice of science or medicine.

It has been a privilege to work with a large number of public servants in the Department of Health, other departments, the Health Service Executive (HSE), and a range of agencies, who have impressed me deeply with their ability, intellectual energy, collegiality, humanity, work ethic, and effectiveness. The pandemic is a strong argument for systematic investment in public services, to protect citizens and the economy from internal inequalities and external shocks.

It has been a particular privilege to work closely with colleagues on NPHET; it is an experience unprecedented in my professional life, and unlikely to be replicated. The public figures are well known: Dr Tony Holohan, Dr Ronan Glynn, Dr Cillian de Gascun. The nation could not have wished for better, stronger, or more resilient leadership than that which was provided by, and continues to be provided by, those individuals, and by the wider team.

The public will be less aware of the central element of our public health response, the regional departments of public health and their staff and leadership, among whom there are many heroes. It is appropriate to single out an exemplar, Dr John Cuddihy, director of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), who along with his dedicated staff, day after day, has gathered the data, marshalled the response, and translated broad public health advice into specific guidance and protocols.

Concluding thoughts

Normally a time of year when we spice the dark days with joy as the season turns, we face a second Christmas with a sense of anxiety and constraint, knowing that we are well protected by vaccination, but uncertain as to what this new variant will bring. Exhausted, we are called again to protect ourselves and each other by avoiding that which we crave, close human contact. Let us remember that this pandemic will end. And when it does, it will be important to heal, but not forget.

The pandemic is just one aspect, an explosive and frightening aspect, of our ecological crisis. The emergence, crossing of the species barrier, and rapid global spread of SARS-CoV-2 occurred in the context of our changed relationship with and impact on the ecosphere. The pandemic, like the climate and ecological crises, can be mitigated by technical solutions, but fundamentally it requires our collective action through changed behaviours to protect our species and our planet.

The pandemic is a reminder, perhaps our last reminder, of the power of nature, and the fact that we must adapt to its rules, because it will not bend to ours. The cost of a delayed response, an incomplete response, or a divided response is enormous.

Teachers Are Heroes – and Not Just for the Education They Provide

On the true importance of schools to society



Dr Niall Muldoon
Ombudsman for Children

The pandemic has clarified the true importance of schools to society and shown us how teachers play a major role in protecting the rights of all our children. This article outlines the role of teachers and schools in upholding children's rights in Ireland and the importance of supporting them to do that by providing a strong counselling service to every school.

It is redundant to say that Covid-19 will change Ireland – that is a given. The most important questions to ask are, how will Ireland be changed, and what are the opportunities for improvement?

In the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), we have covered a lot of bases since this pandemic took hold. We have interacted with the Department of Health on vaccines and waiting lists; we have liaised with officials on the proposed abolition of the Department of Children; and we have engaged with the Department of Justice on Direct Provision. But the most significant series of ongoing engagements we had was with the Department of Education.

I recently came across the quote: 'When nothing is certain, everything is possible.' To me, this really reflected the education landscape in Ireland as we begin to emerge from a worldwide pandemic that turned education in this country upside down. It reminds us that a crisis can create a fresh opportunity to improve and change those areas of weakness that we know are in our education system.

While we were all distracted by the pandemic, Ireland's population managed to break the 5 million mark for the first time since the Famine (RTÉ, 2021). As a nation, we need to pay heed to the demographics of that population. There were 60,000 babies born in Ireland in 2020, many with only their mother to greet them due to pandemic restrictions, and many who might have only met or been hugged by their wider family after nine or twelve months of living in isolation because of the lockdowns.

One of the major learnings that has to come out of this crisis is the recognition, by both the state and all of us as citizens, that schools provide so much more than just education.

We have come to recognise that schools have a role as safe havens for children at risk of abuse; as providers of warmth, support, and sustenance

for those who are poor and without a proper meal at home; and as a place where children learn to play, to socialise, to cooperate, and to understand themselves and their role in the world. None of that is measured in the 'Drumcondras', nor in the Junior or Leaving Certificate exams, and none of it is credited to the fantastic teachers and school leaders when their workload is considered.

In fact the opposite is true. I still vividly recall a response from the Department of Education, less than 10 years ago, about an investigation we did into a child being refused a place in more than 20 schools. We had claimed that the home tuition alternative offered to that child for two years deprived them of the opportunity to learn and enhance their social skills in line with other students. The Department was very clear that they had no role or responsibility in the provision or improvement of social skills and therefore could not be held accountable for their loss. I would like to think that such a letter would not be written now.

It has also become clear that teachers and school leaders provide two indispensable roles for society: as educators, and as human rights defenders. Indeed, I would agree with Prof. Áine Hyland when she said that 'schools should never again be closed and that teachers are essential workers' (O'Brien, 2021), because, in my opinion, they are one of the main active ingredients in fulfilling our State's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Most would agree that a teacher's primary role is to execute our nation's duty under Article 28: that 'children have the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability; if they're in detention, or if they're a refugee' (OHCHR, 1989). Some may extend their understanding of a teacher's role to include upholding Article 29, which highlights 'that the education of the child shall be directed to, among other things, the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'. I truly believe that this is the most important role that teachers play and that the pandemic has clarified this for so many in our society.

The capacity of our children to reach their full potential without education and educators is, at best, severely curtailed, and at worst, impossible. We could see that in the children who went into the pandemic with disadvantages: those with a disability, those experiencing poverty or homelessness, those living in dysfunctional or abusive homes, and those with medical or mental health issues. Without the education system, children's development stalled or regressed. Society relies on our schools and teachers to make up for the disadvantages that we, as a nation, have not done enough to lift from so many of our children. That is a shameful fact that can no longer be denied.

The simplest metric to prove this point was the massive reduction in child protection referrals during the pandemic. The vast majority of this reduction can be accounted for by the absence of teachers in children's lives. As soon as schools returned, so too did the referrals – teachers are like guardian angels for so many of our children at risk.

Teachers and school leaders provide two indispensable roles for society: as educators, and as human rights defenders.

[We need to] ensure access to an independent, qualified therapist as a certainty for all schools, across primary and secondary levels.

Teachers and school leaders in communities affected by drug abuse and violence are being forced to act as watchdogs. I will always recall with horror, and no little admiration, hearing from one primary school principal about how they watched their students very closely from fifth class onwards for signs of extra spending or spare money, because they knew that every year, four or five children would be recruited to deliver and collect illegal drugs. This is thankless and often dangerous work for our educators, and we as a society do not recognise or support them enough for it.

The annual report 2020 from Women's Aid detailed a 43% increase in contacts with their services last year, compared with 2019 (O'Regan, 2021). Such violence has a huge impact on children in the family whether they are directly on the receiving end or are witnesses to it. Those children, again, often find refuge in their school, whether by focusing on their progress, by getting a listening ear from a trusted teacher, or, if they are lucky enough to have it available, by going directly for counselling.

All of this fantastic, altruistic work reinforces the vital role that teachers play in upholding the UNCRC. A child has the right to be protected from being hurt, neglected, or mistreated, in body or mind, and to receive help if they have experienced such harm (UNCRC, Articles 19 and 39). Children have the right to protection from harmful drugs and the drug trade (Article 33) and the right to be protected from sexual abuse (Article 34). Teachers protect and promote all of these rights every day – they are superheroes, and the ability to educate is only one of the many powers they possess.

However, teachers cannot be asked to do all of this on our behalf unless they are properly supported in their efforts. There are many ways to provide this support. One of these would be to ensure access to an independent, qualified therapist as a certainty for all schools, across primary and secondary levels.

As things stand, with limited access to the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for most schools, if a teacher recognises that a child is suffering from anxiety, bereavement, depression, an eating disorder, or challenging behaviour, they highlight it to the parent or carer and hope that they take their views on board and are willing and able to access public therapy or can afford private therapy. If the issues are seen to derive from the family setting, that leaves the teacher in a serious bind and with no way of helping the child, yet they still have to facilitate their education.

I am constantly reminded of my visit to schools in Finland, and I wonder why we cannot replicate their model. There, every school has access to its own nurse, social worker, and psychologist, and the huge benefits derived from this support were highlighted by the school leaders. Countries such as Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Slovenia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic also offer emotional counselling services in their schools (Downes, 2021).

I therefore believe that the state must step in and offer such services. If a child is able to address whatever issues are arising at the earliest opportunity, then the future will be a much happier and more optimistic

place for them. The unthinkable alternative is that we stick with the status quo, where children languish on 12–24-month waiting lists for primary care intervention, allowing issues to grow and worsen.

The percentage of students who contacted the Ombudsman for Children's Office in 2020 doubled as a result of the Leaving Certificate debacle (OCO, 2020). Every young person we spoke to referred to the mental health impact of the situation they faced. One said:

Students' voices have been completely ignored, and the mental health of students is going to suffer massively. I have already witnessed students all over Twitter and other social media platforms claiming that this decision will be the reason they take their lives. This is simply horrifying and frightening.

The latest OECD figures show that investment in education in Ireland as a percentage of national wealth languishes at the bottom end of the league table for wealthy countries (O'Brien, 2021). We need to recognise the value of what we do in this sphere rather than the cost of it. Those countries that provide more comprehensive emotional support in their schools understand that such spending saves much more in the fields of health (both physical and mental), social protection, and employment in the future.

We can no longer pay lip service to the teachers, education leaders, special needs assistants (SNAs), caretakers, and others in the school community who protect and uphold the rights of our children. Recognition should come with commitment: a commitment to provide the resources required to serve our children properly.

We stand at a crossroads in education, equipped for the journey with new wisdom and knowledge acquired over the past 18 months. The road behind is blocked – there is no going back there. But how do we go forward? We have seen what can be done. We have seen the energy and commitment that government can invest in education. This same energy must be applied to forging ahead to create a better environment for students and teachers, one where children can thrive and where teachers are recognised and supported to fulfil their roles as educators and rights defenders.

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Early Childhood

First Ever Graduates of the Flexible Learning BA Degree in Early Childhood Education & Care at TUS

Pictured at the conferring ceremony of the Flexible Learning BA Degree in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) are:

President Professor Vincent Cunnane with Sabrina Shortt O'Meara, Raheen, and Carla Geraghty, Janesboro.

Photo: Arthur Ellis.

The Temptations of Block Play

Approaches to reconceptualising and reforming the Irish early childhood education and care system



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This review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland in 2021 takes a systems perspective to ask what crisis lessons, if any, have been learned from the pandemic, what progress has been made, and what new perils have arisen. As the sector edges towards professionalisation, are we any nearer to a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system?

Where to start? To attempt a critical review of the events and developments shaping the Irish early childhood education landscape in any given year is a risky undertaking, and 2021 was no different. A lot has happened since I concluded my article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020* with a note of hope and cautious optimism grounded in 'Ireland's remarkable capability for social transformation' (Urban, 2021, p. 31). Written one year into a global pandemic that, among other things, put a spotlight on the precariousness of social infrastructure in Ireland and globally, the article was subtitled 'Crisis lessons for the future of early childhood education and care'.

Picking up the threads as we look back on another year, maybe a way into the 2021 review could be to ask what, if any, of the crisis lessons have been learned, what progress has been made, and what new perils have arisen in the process. Are we any nearer to a universal, rights-based, public early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in this country?

A systems perspective (managing messes)

I approach my analysis from a systems perspective for several reasons. First, an effective early childhood system is what *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* aspires to achieve by 2028 (Department for Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). We should take this aspiration seriously, enquire how it can best be achieved, and never cease to ask ourselves how things are going.

Second, early childhood systems are what I care about and have written about for many years: How can we better understand how actors and agents in a complex environment come together in ways that result in better, more just and equitable outcomes for *all* children, their families and communities, for local and global society? The early childhood system I am referring to consists of *people* – educators, children, mothers

and fathers, administrators, policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, and others. It also includes institutions, legal frameworks and regulations, and so on – elements with the power to significantly shape the experiences and outcomes for everyone involved. They all bring a lot to the table: their aspirations, hopes, and dreams, their values and traditions, their politics, policies, and interests, their professional practices and operational models, their institutional logic; the list goes on.

Third, because a systems perspective enables us to shift the focus from the individual to the whole, and to questions of how the elements of the system – be they human or non-human – can come together in something that is more *competent*, *equitable*, and *sustainable* than what we have now, and delivers better outcomes for *all*. Such a shift of perspective, too, allows me to preface my analysis with a huge shout-out to the commitment and resilience of all those who did their utmost to keep early childhood education and care services open under extremely difficult conditions: early childhood educators first and foremost, but also everyone who supported them in their task. Recognising their commitment, the necessary analysis focuses on the shortcomings of the system we are operating in (and how to address them), a system that continues to fail children, families, educators, and society.

Which brings me to a first level of analysis of the situation in which the early childhood system finds itself at the end of 2021: it's a mess! Let me explain:

One of the remarkable developments of the past year was the emergence of a broad consensus that the Irish early childhood education and care system is not fit for purpose. Obviously, this is not news for those involved in the system (e.g., educators) or affected by it (e.g., parents). What has changed is that the consensus now extends into public discourse – reflected in the media, for instance – and across the political spectrum. There is public recognition that we have a problem, which in itself is an important acknowledgement, a first step towards dealing with the issues.

But no one simple and straightforward solution has presented itself. Rather, as the American philosopher William James might say, we are still experiencing an *unstructured state of confusion* from which strings of problems continue to be extracted: affordability, accessibility, quality, working conditions, resilience to disruption, and so on. Russell L. Ackoff, a pioneer of systems thinking, refers to what decision makers have to deal with under such conditions as *messes*. 'A mess', he writes, 'is a system of external conditions that produces dissatisfaction' (Ackoff, 1974, p. 5).

The fundamental implication of adopting a systems perspective is that problems do not exist in isolation, nor do their solutions. As we identify individual problems, each one 'affects the state of the messes of which they are part' (ibid.). As a consequence, it is impossible to get out of the mess by 'independently solving its component problems' (ibid.). Or, in the words of Casaubon, the protagonist of Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*: 'As the man said, for every complex problem there's a simple solution, and it's wrong.'

There is another, more hopeful way of interpreting the 'messiness' of the Irish ECEC environment: It is precisely the sector's complexity that calls

for, and opens, the possibility for fundamental reform of the way we – all of Irish society – relate to services for young children and their families. What emerges are the contours of an essentially democratic, political, and ethical project that will take years to complete – but should be brought under way with urgency now.

The temptations of block play

At the time of writing, there still appears to be a lack of ambition at policy level to lead the ethical and political project to create a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system for all young children and their families in Ireland. The prominence of 'childcare' as the defining term in policy debates and public discourse – and in the Programme for Government, as I have argued (Urban, 2021) – has echoes of the debate that entered the EU policy space about 30 years ago.

In 1992, the driving factor of the EU's emerging interest in services for young children was to urge member states to increase 'childcare' provision in order to promote gender equality and facilitate women's participation in the labour market (Council of the European Communities, 1992; Urban, 2012). It took almost two decades for EU policies to fully transition to a recognition that 'participation in high-quality early childhood education and care' is beneficial for all children, reaching far beyond its role as a service for working parents (Council of the European Union, 2011). It took almost another decade for the EU to embrace and promote systemic approaches to ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019).

With the EU Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021), Europe is only now beginning to catch up with global recognition that early childhood development, education, and care are an essential part of any society's critical infrastructure that requires integrated and multi-sectoral policy approaches (Kagan et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021). There is no doubt that early childhood educators, the sector in general, and specific Irish policies regarding young children and their education have embraced and incorporated many of these developments. I do wonder, however, about the public and policy discourse, *the way we talk about services for young children and their purpose*. With some notable exceptions, perceptions in Irish society of what – and who – early childhood education and care are for seem stuck in a time warp!

Nonetheless, there has been no shortage of activity in the early childhood policy space. Welcome efforts have been made to put in place some of the building blocks that are essential for an effective and competent ECEC system (Urban et al., 2012). Some of the processes that were brought under way in 2019, following the launch of *First 5* in 2018, are nearing completion. Others have been added to the mix. Below are some highlights:

- A Workforce Development Plan that will bring much-needed clarity to the professional roles, role profiles, and possible career trajectories for early childhood educators. The plan was prepared by a steering group in 2019–20 and finalised in a consultative process with stakeholders and subject experts in 2021. The final document, titled 'Nurturing Skills', has been published by DCEDIY (2021a).

- The work of an expert group to develop a 'new funding model' for ECEC, tasked with 'examining the current model of funding, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services and how additional resourcing can be delivered for the sector to achieve these objectives drawing on international practice in this area'. This work, too, has been completed. The report of the expert group, titled 'Partnership for the Public Good', has been published (<https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/>); both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan were launched by Minister O'Gorman on 7 December 2021.
- A review of the 'operating and oversight model' used by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to 'support the delivery of accessible, affordable and high-quality early learning care and school age childcare services'.
- The establishment of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) with the aim of establishing an Employment Regulation Order that addresses pay and working conditions in ECEC services.
- The launch of a consultation on reform of the existing inspection regime.
- The launch of 'Principles for a High Quality and Accessible Public Childcare Model' by the Community Platform (Community Platform, 2021).
- The publication of the final report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, demanding the transition to a 'publicly funded, accessible and regulated model of quality, affordable early years and out of hours childcare', underpinned by an increase of public funding to the internationally recognised benchmark of 1% of GDP (Citizens' Assembly, 2021).
- The launch of a research report on the establishment of an independent professional body for the early childhood profession, conducted by CRANN and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (Moloney & Davern, 2021).
- The launch of an online consultation process on the implantation of the EU Child Guarantee in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2021b).
- The publication of a review of Irish ECEC policies, undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021).

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Each initiative is a valuable and necessary piece of work. Each one addresses a key challenge that has been present in the Irish ECEC environment for years: unsustainable funding, uncertainty about professional roles and careers, untenable working conditions, and inefficient governance. We are finally moving, it seems, out of William James's *unstructured state of confusion* into a phase where problems are identified, acknowledged, and addressed.

However, the question remains whether and how the solutions offered by the various initiatives can come together to manoeuvre us out of Ackoff's mess that we are undeniably in. It is worrying, for instance, that the initiatives addressing the governance of the system – funding model, workforce development, operating model – saw no change to their terms of reference despite significant changes of the context they are operating in. As I have argued before, including in this publication (Urban, 2021), the

critical element missing from the outset is an explicit remit to work towards system change, not system repair.

The new funding model, in its title at least, finally recognises early childhood education and care as a *public good*. It recognises, too, that realising this aspiration will require taking much more *public responsibility* (Urban, 2021) for providing education and care for all children in this country. The 'Partnership for the Public Good' certainly deserves appreciation and careful analysis. At first reading (at the time of writing, on the day of publication), it appears that the proposal moves closer to supply-side funding of services (a 'core funding'), which is overdue and welcome. Welcome, too, is to see that the core funding is supposed to be conditional to a fee freeze for providers – although this announcement is already triggering 'market' resistance.

It appears, however, that the proposal avoids addressing the fundamental structural flaws of the 'childcare market', and the underlying democratic and political dimensions of the public good in relation to the right to education and care for every young child from birth. If the 'Partnership for the Public Good' is supposed to be a turning point, a decisive step towards a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system for Ireland, it deserves all our support. But it would have been good to see this expressed unambiguously as a policy ambition and direction of travel.

The second major building block of what will eventually form the 'effective' early childhood system that *First 5* aspires to is the Workforce Development Plan, published (on the day of writing this article) as 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028'. I have commented before on the imposition of the ELC acronym and its implications for a profession that is educational at its core (unacceptable, inaccurate, and setting Ireland outside of international consensus) (Urban, 2019). Without repeating the argument for my continued use of ECEC, it is worth pointing out that the document, despite a thorough consultation, risks coming across as a plan *for*, not *with*, the profession. This, in turn, points to the continued absence of a collective ECEC profession that 'speaks and thinks for itself' (Urban & Dalli, 2012).

The Workforce Development Plan prominently mentions the absence of a professional association as something that will have to be addressed. This is a much-needed step forward, as it recognises that an autonomous professional association is indeed an indispensable part of our 'effective' ECEC system – not a welcome add-on. To be clear: I welcome the Workforce Development Plan because it will bring much-needed clarity and direction to the sector. However, as a member of the steering group of the process I was surprised to learn that:

- Despite aiming at professionalising the ECEC workforce, the term *profession* is absent from the title. Terms like *skills* (who defines these?) and *nurturing* (who is being nurtured, and who does the nurturing?) come with connotations that do not necessarily evoke images of a confident, autonomous profession.
- Key recommendations made by invited subject experts and stakeholders were not included in the document, e.g., in relation to diversity and equality and to State support for a professional

association (although the recommendations are available on the DCEDIY website).

- The published version of the document, according to DCEDIY, is 'very similar' (personal communication) to the one agreed by the steering group – so obviously it is not identical.

I observe with interest, too, the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee, comprising representatives of employers and employees (trade unions). It promises to address another fundamental failure of the existing Irish ECEC system: to provide recognition and appropriate and sustainable remuneration and working conditions for its workforce. This is a potentially important move, as it prepares the ground for establishing proper industrial relations between organised employer and employee bodies. Will it be able – or willing – to challenge its own founding paradigm, that there is an 'industry' to educate and care for young children? Can it become a voice that articulates the need to transition from a business model to a public service model? Or will the JLC become a tool to improve, but maintain, the status quo? We should watch developments with critical appreciation as we continue to make the case for a universal, rights-based, public system of early childhood education and care.

On 26 September 2021, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth, spoke on public radio about a range of issues related to his department's brief but focusing on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the interview, he touched briefly upon the more general problems facing the early childhood sector. Remarkably, he identified marketisation as the central problem (Newstalk, 2021). His was a welcome (if rare and not repeated) acknowledgement of what is at stake if we are serious about building a universal, rights-based, and public early childhood system in Ireland.

Cui bono? Who benefits from the way we organise 'childcare' in Ireland? One issue absent from the debate is the apparent inability to distinguish between different forms of private, for-profit provision, the central element of our marketised system. A unique feature of the Irish ECEC landscape is the prevalence of small businesses, often owned, managed, and run by one person. They are close to the communities and families they serve and are a valuable part of how ECEC can and should be provided. Many operate as businesses because it is the only frame of reference available. We should not conflate them with the fast-growing corporate sector, often multinational chains, that have entered the Irish 'childcare market' precisely because it is so profitable.

International experiences (e.g., New Zealand, The Netherlands, UK, Australia) show that corporate childcare providers, some of them the same multinationals now operating in the Irish 'market', exert pressure on governments to lower regulatory, quality, and qualification standards. This poses a real risk to the declared aim of improving the quality of ECEC. In Ireland, highly profitable companies (e.g., Giraffe group: €2 million pre-tax profits in 2018; see also O'Brien, 2021; Coyle, 2021) are already lobbying the regulator for weaker standards, such as regarding sleep arrangements for toddlers, which risks putting pressure on adult-child ratios (Flynn, 2021).

Developing ECEC as public good requires democratic debate

Arising from this situation is a question that reaches well beyond the early childhood sector. It will have to be addressed in open public and democratic debate: Do we agree that it is desirable and acceptable that vital public service, including essential infrastructure, education, and collective care, should be delivered by providers whose main motive is profit, and whose main responsibility is to their shareholders?

More specifically, in the current early-childhood policy landscape, there are questions we should be asking about possible unintended (or not-so-unintended?) consequences of the recently established JLC. How do we ensure it does not hand more leverage to large corporate providers? And that it does not maintain or even increase pressure on wages, conditions, standards, and regulation? There may well be advantages of scale as we move towards larger entities in ECEC services, for example concerning regulation and forward planning. The political and democratic question is whether we want those advantages to arise in planned and democratically accountable ways in a public ECEC system. The alternative, I am concerned, is to be stuck with policies indefinitely reacting to market pressures.

Better workforce management does not equate to professionalisation

While it is overdue to address pay, conditions, and profile of the early childhood workforce (i.e., through JLC and Workforce Development Plan), we should be careful not to confuse these necessary initiatives with the general task of *professionalising* ECEC. As I and others have argued consistently, this is not primarily a technical task. On the contrary: It is first and foremost an ethical and political project, one that centres on the collective identity of professionals concerned with the education and care of young children.

Without doubt, there are organisational tasks that must be addressed, and structures to be established in order to make it work. But the main questions to be asked, debated, and communicated by the project of professionalisation are questions of identity: *Who are we, the early childhood education and care profession? Who am I, as a member of that profession?* This is the core task of an autonomous professional association, and it is welcome to see growing support for such a body to be established. The need for a professional association has been acknowledged, for instance, in the process of creating the Workforce Development Plan from the outset.

There is a broad consensus that the establishment of a professional association can succeed only if it comes from within the profession. Negotiating the many voices, interests, and aims in that space is in itself a contribution to professionalisation. As such, it cannot be imposed; it can only be owned and run by the profession. However, the overall responsibility for the effective early childhood system towards which we are working lies with government, and it manifests in the government's role in *creating the conditions* for the 'effective system' to flourish. An autonomous professional association for ECEC is an indispensable part of the system. What we need to see is government assuming a role that is much more proactive than what is now included in the Workforce Development Plan, not in setting up or running a professional association, but in *enabling it coming into existence*.

There is a temptation to tackle the challenges of the ECEC system one by one, and at distinct construction sites. Some will say, not without reason, that it is the pragmatic approach to resolving critical issues. However, none of the building blocks we are handling makes sense unless we share an idea of the edifice we are constructing.

Care for the self, the other, the planet: Early childhood education and care as an ethical and existential project

May you live in interesting times. This apocryphal wish, often falsely purported to be a Chinese curse, seems an appropriate description of the state we are in. If anything, the ongoing and currently resurging Covid-19 pandemic gives cause to urgent reconsideration of what our efforts to build an 'effective' early childhood system are really for. Especially if we look at them in the wider context of the convergence of existential global crises that will be real lived experience for young children as they grow up: the high likelihood of more pandemics, catastrophic climate change, loss of biodiversity, and a widening crisis of democracy, economy, and peace. All this should alert us to a necessary democratic debate about the purpose of ECEC, both in the here and now, and with our eyes firmly on the increasingly uncertain future.

Some obvious answers are beginning to emerge from global experiences. Young children are most affected by the pandemic disruptions; UNICEF (2020) alerts us to a global children's rights crisis. While there is widespread disruption of education – 150 countries closed their schools throughout 2020 (UNESCO, 2021) – hard data on the youngest children is still hard to come by (Gromada et al., 2020). The emerging picture is one of widespread disruption of early childhood services in all countries affected by the pandemic (Kenny & Yang, 2021). Emerging, too, is the recognition that countries with more integrated early childhood systems appear to be coping better with the disruption: multi-sectoral policies are an indicator of systems resilience.

As we reconfigure our services for young children, seeking to make them fit for purpose for the coming decades, the questions we should ask ourselves are no longer merely organisational. Humanity, due to its own actions and inactions, faces an existential crisis; collective survival is no longer a philosophical question. Considering this stark reality, how do we, as early childhood educators, contribute to young children's education and care for the self, the other, and the planet? This, I suggest, is the question of purpose that legitimises our efforts to reconceptualise the system.

In a recent outlook on the state of social systems, the OECD observes:

As countries plan their recovery from the multiple crises triggered by the pandemic, they have an opportunity to make these systems more inclusive, more sustainable, more resilient and more responsive. (OECD, 2021, p. 9)

But this, the authors conclude, can only happen

with the active participation of citizens in new forms of collective action at the local, national and international level. (ibid.)

Could this be what we should be educating young children for?

Young children, babies, or toddlers who enter an early childhood service for the first time today will be about 10 years old by the time we will most likely have missed the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. They will be 30 by the time we will have missed, as it stands today, the 2050 zero-carbon-emission target now widely acknowledged as the last chance to avoid catastrophic and irreversible overheating of Earth by the end of the 21st century. At that time, they may well be the parents of young children themselves. What do we, early childhood educators, advocates, and scholars, at the beginning of the second decade of the century, want these children to experience as they grow up?

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Early Learning and Care Experience of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Findings from early years education inspection



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The temporary closures of early learning and care (ELC) settings in 2020–21 had significant negative effects on the lives and education of children in Ireland. Early years inspectors at the Department of Education interviewed owners and managers of ELC settings to discuss the challenges and successes. This article describes the findings, which include a strong capacity for resilience, creativity, and professionalism.

Introduction

The suspension of early learning and care (ELC) settings and schools in March 2020, as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, has had significant negative impacts on the lives of children and young people. Ironically, public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus enhanced the spread of a range of stressors among children and families. These caused anxiety, disengagement, and disruption in the learning experiences of children and young people at all stages of education.

This article shares the findings from contacts with ELC settings by the Department of Education Inspectorate (DEI) from September 2020 to June 2021. It highlights the undisputed challenges for both provision and practice created by the global pandemic, and it highlights the dividends due to the creative and innovative responses of the ELC practice community.

DEI early years inspectors maintained contact with ELC settings during the early stages of resumed operation from September to December 2020. As part of this support, structured interviews were carried out by telephone with owners and managers to discuss the challenges and successes they were experiencing in re-establishing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) preschool programme.

Education inspections in ELC settings resumed in April 2021. Initially these were follow-through inspections in settings where a previous early years education inspection (EYEI) had taken place. This approach made sense, given inspectors’ familiarity with these settings and the fact that follow-through inspections’ more focused nature required less time on site. A programme of full EYEIs was recommenced in June 2021.

Data generated from this research and evaluation work has identified distinct phases in the response of the ELC sector to the pandemic:

- **Adaptation:** focused first response to the public health guidance
- **Innovation:** creative approaches to the challenges of providing for continuity in learning experiences for children and staff
- **Consolidation:** integration of positive changes to provision and practice into the regular plans for the programme of learning.

Adaptation

Many of the traditional practices associated with providing ELC experiences for young children proved challenging in the context of the public health advice aimed at preventing the spread of Covid-19. These include the natural inclination of very young children in the ELC setting to seek physical contact with staff and their peers, the normal welcome for parents to enter and engage with practitioners in the learning environment, and the provision of various play experiences, including messy play, dressing-up play, and role play.

Practitioners in ELC settings reported stress and anxiety about managing the reopening of settings and, in particular, being responsible for the implementation of health and safety guidance. The following comments are typical of exchanges with DEI early years inspectors at this time:

The implications of having to recruit new staff to help with the timing of breaks and down time for staff should be considered. There have been financial implications, and this is an extra cost that was not there prior to Covid-19.

The amount of extra paperwork and cleaning took away from the time spent with the children.

We are a very open service, and not having parents coming into the building has been strange. We have had to limit the people that parents come in contact with to just the key worker, so informal communication has been greatly reduced.

It is also important to note, however, that even as these stresses were expressed, providers were also able to identify positive opportunities:

Seeing how resilient the children are and how well they have adapted to the new routines and changes.

We have revamped the garden, and we spend a lot of time every day outside. It's really beneficial for the children and the staff. We are realising how much learning can happen outside.

Innovation

The positive attitudes illustrated in the previous section become more evident as time progressed, but the emphasis in settings remained focused on the safety and welfare of children and staff. Some lovely examples of creative and innovative approaches were shared with inspectors. These combined public health guidance with pedagogy, and engaged children in positive learning experiences:

“ We spend a lot of time every day outside... really beneficial... We are realising how much learning can happen outside.”

As parents were not allowed enter the building when new children started and current children returned, we decided to do an introduction session outside.

We introduced a new computer programme as a means of sharing information with parents. While we have short informal conversations at handover times, all formal information, such as daily routines and children's daily activities, are shared through the app.

We found that the Covid signage could be intimidating for some children, and so we involved them in redesigning the signs – we were amazed at how knowledgeable and engaged the children were on all aspects of the safety routines.

Among the significant positive advantages arising from the pandemic were the many opportunities for outdoor learning to be developed and enhanced. Many settings showed great energy and enthusiasm for innovation in their outdoor environments, with many permanent fixtures being installed with the support of additional funding.

Consolidation

The extent of the consolidation phase is becoming more evident since the Department of Education inspection programme resumed in September 2021. The continued use of the outdoor learning environment is noteworthy, as is the creative use of information and communication technology to engage with parents and the wider community.

It was very positive to see that primary schools had engaged with ELC providers to support children's transition to school in September 2021, by using videos of the school environments and teachers and staff. Although it is still early days, many providers have reported that they intend to retain these new practices into the future.

“ It was very positive to see that primary schools had engaged with ELC providers to support children's transition to school in September 2021.”

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and the necessary public health responses have had the potential to be a very negative and damaging influence on the learning, wellbeing, and development of young children across the world. In Ireland, the closure of settings and the stress and anxiety associated with their reopening and the resumption of the ECCE programme of preschool were significant. These undoubtedly impacted on children's learning by constraining a wide range of pedagogical activities that are normally high-quality early learning experiences.

Despite the challenges, however, engagement with providers and practitioners in ELC settings by DE inspectors during the pandemic has identified a strong capacity for resilience, creativity, and professionalism that can rightly be described as a positive outcome of the Covid-19 pandemic.

If time is now allowed for professional reflection on the experiences of the past year, and if opportunities are created to share the learning, there is much to be optimistic about in the quality of children's early learning experiences. The DE Inspectorate looks forward to engaging with, validating, and supporting this work as we continue to support the ELC sector through our programme of early years education inspection.

NEW COURSE: Diploma in School Age Childcare

GMIT is offering a brand new course in its suite of Early Childhood Education and Care programmes - the new Diploma in School Age Childcare (Level 7).

The innovative academic programme was designed in consultation with stakeholders in the School Age Childcare and Early Learning and Care sectors. One hundred and five participants took part in the consultation process.

School Age Childcare became a regulated service in February 2019, requiring providers of school age childcare services to register with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency.

The programme will support the upskilling of professionals working in this area, meeting employers' requirements outlined during the stakeholder consultation process with GMIT.

The new programme will be delivered using a blended approach (online and one Saturday a month) at GMIT's Mayo campus over one academic year and is designed to be accessible to individuals already working full-time in this sector. Modules include Leadership, Psychology, Digital Technologies, Relationships, Nature Pedagogy and Play.

Louise Kilbane, Programme Chair of the GMIT Diploma in School Age Childcare, said

"I am very excited to be the programme chair of our new innovative course in School Age Childcare...

For many years now, in Ireland, the sector has called upon higher-level institutions to develop a training programme for those working with children in School Age Childcare (SAC). We are delighted to support the sector in answering this call and we know the graduates will bring high quality to the SAC services across the country."



Children exploring in the GMIT woodland trail.

Adapting the AIM Programme during the Pandemic

Providing level 4 educational advice and mentoring

This article describes how the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) programme was adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic so that early-years specialists could continue to provide level 4 educational advice and mentoring.

Introduction

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. It is a cross-government initiative led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEIDY) and administered by Pobal.

AIM provides universal (1-3) and targeted (4-7) supports to preschool settings that focus on the needs of the individual child: see diagram and www.aim.gov.ie.

Better Start AIM provides targeted supports (4, 6, 7) that help individual children with disabilities to access their local preschool and to meaningfully participate in the free preschool ECCE programme. Under level 4 of the model, a national team of AIM early-years specialists (EYSs) provide expert educational advice and mentoring to preschool practitioners.

The EYSs work with practitioners to build their capacity, confidence, and competence in helping the child to participate actively in the setting. This is tailored to the capacity of the preschool and is based on a child's strengths, interests, and needs; it is not diagnosis-led.

The early-years specialists, in partnership with practitioners, use the national early childhood frameworks of Siolta and Aistear to develop specific strategies, goals documented in 'My Inclusion Plan' for the individual child, while creating an inclusive setting for all children. This is done through mentoring and coaching to enable practitioners to reflect on their practice to enhance what they already know and do.

Key to the EYSs' work with children and practitioners is to conduct on-site observation and mentoring visits to ascertain the level of support that a child may need and the capacity of the setting to meet those needs. This article discusses how the AIM programme was adapted

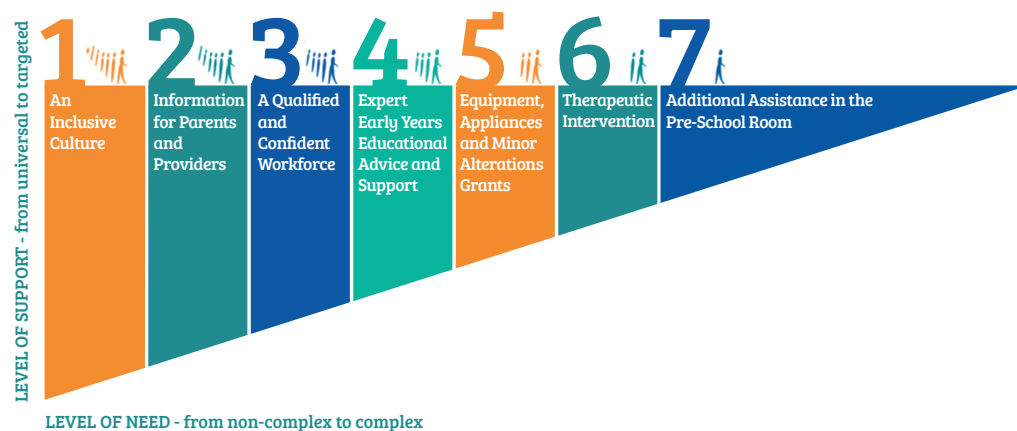


Delia Goodman

National Team Lead,
Better Start Access and
Inclusion Model (AIM)

during the Covid-19 pandemic so that EYs could continue to provide level 4 educational advice and mentoring.

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



In January 2020 the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of Covid-19. On 12 March, Early Learning and Care (ELC) facilities were instructed to close, and on 27 March, Ireland entered full lockdown, with a ban on non-essential travel, closure of a wide range of services and businesses, and government instruction to work from home where possible. During this time of national emergency, we recognised the need to adapt the programme to ensure that children, families, and practitioners would continue to have access to AIM and to adjust to the changing work environment.

Continuing to provide support to children, families, and preschool settings was more important than ever. There was an urgency not only to maintain the momentum of mentoring but to prepare for the reopening of preschool settings, possibly under continuing restrictions such as social distancing, while supporting children's transition back to ECCE environments after the extended period of closure.

Adapting the programme

Mentoring is a key element in the implementation of educational advice and capacity-building under AIM. On-site visits are important for understanding children's needs and for developing the practitioner relationship for change to take place. Better Start's mentoring model supports practitioners to engage in practice that leads to positive learning experiences for children, while at the same time promoting and encouraging practitioners' sense of personal accomplishment and empowerment to sustain and develop quality and inclusive practice.

We see mentoring as a holistic development process focusing on the individual rather than the task (Garvey et al., 2014). This approach promotes practitioners as competent and active agents in their own learning through

the mentoring relationship. With the added challenge of Covid-19 health restrictions, we needed to review how our current mentoring processes could be adapted to facilitate observation while continuing to develop and maintain relationships in the absence of on-site visits.

We considered the use of e-mentoring to overcome the challenge of not being able to conduct on-site visits. E-mentoring shares the goal of face-to-face mentoring: to establish a trusting, nurturing, positive relationship between the mentor and mentee (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 2009). It was particularly worthy of consideration as a way to virtually bring external expertise and a variety of methods to preschool providers, practitioners, children, and families.

E-mentoring could be used as a vehicle to connect with preschool practitioners and as an additional communication tool in a blended process. It could be used to maintain relationships and create new ways of interacting with practitioners and families. It takes advantage of the ease, convenience, and availability of internet and phone communication. The key point is that mentoring principles remain the same whether face-to-face or distanced. The intention is to focus on the strengths and needs of practitioners, supporting them to reflect on their beliefs, evaluate their practice, and trial new practices to effect change and improvement.

In using e-mentoring to keep in touch with preschool providers during health restrictions, we needed to consider how we could keep in contact with the children who were now at home. Parental involvement is an important part of AIM from the application process and throughout the

implementation of level 4 educational advice and mentoring: 'experience indicates that parents and preschool practitioners often have good insight into what the child needs to participate in preschool, and their views and input are crucial' (IDG, 2015, p. 42).

We introduced a parent review call, where an EYS had a telephone call with the parent. This enabled the EYS to gain a fuller understanding of the child's strengths, interests, and abilities at this time. EYSs said this gave them more-current information about the child's abilities, needs, and health supports and gave them the opportunity to discuss AIM and the role of the EYS.

Introducing the review call encouraged further development of partnerships with parents in the setting, ensuring that the links between the service and parents should remain and that the service provider should continue to be the first point of contact for the parents.

I also think it's important that the link between the service and the parent remains the first point of communication. (EYS internal survey response)

There were many benefits to the parent review. EYSs identified that it encouraged services to have further parental involvement in the level 4

Parental involvement is an important part of AIM from the application process and throughout the implementation of level 4 educational advice and mentoring.

Mentoring is a key element in the implementation of educational advice and capacity-building under AIM, and on-site visits are important.

process, and that there was a consistent approach to the support given to the child in the setting and at home.

It is paramount that services include the parents in the L4 process, that they share resources and information about what was discussed, etc. during meetings and encourage the services to link in with parents and make them a part of this process so there is a consistent approach from all. (EYS internal survey response)

The parent review call provided EYSs with information they were unable to observe because of the health restrictions. But there was still the challenge of being unable to complete on-site visits. This was addressed through e-mentoring and by adapting the observation tool to enable EYSs to hold a 'service observation review'. This was based on the Access and Inclusion Profile, which is jointly completed by the parent and provider and involved the EYS conducting an online video call with the service provider.

In implementing it, EYSs felt that it enabled the service provider to focus on the areas of need and support for the child. It enabled EYSs to contact more settings in a shorter period and to cut down on wait times that they may experience when organising visits, due to availability. Because the online video call gave practitioners uninterrupted time with the EYS to discuss the child's needs without distraction, there was more focus on the child and more opportunity to engage the practitioner.

“ The telephone call and service observation review through e-mentoring required more preparation time on the part of the Early Years Specialist who had to complete a desk-based review before the call.

Although the use of the parent telephone call and service observation review through e-mentoring was beneficial, it was not without its challenges. It involved identifying a time that was convenient for the parent to take a call and for the service provider to complete the service observation review. It required more preparation time by the EYS, who had to complete a desk-based review before the call.

Technology could be a barrier, because not all practitioners had access to a computer to facilitate an online video call. In some cases, the information from the service observation review could be different from what the parent provided during their telephone call. However, using e-mentoring allowed EYSs to consider all the information gathered to make an informed decision about the level of mentoring and coaching to overcome the challenge of not being able to make on-site visits.

Conclusion

Adapting our process during this time of national emergency gave us an opportunity to expand the range, flexibility, and reach of quality and professional development supports provided by Better Start AIM. E-mentoring processes (video calls, service observation reviews, parent telephone calls) enabled EYSs to continue to provide mentoring and coaching to early-years providers, practitioners, children, and their families.

As restrictions and health advice are being lifted, these enhancements to the programme are being reviewed. We will consider how we can continue

to provide them as an option, in order to be more flexible and to give providers an opportunity to choose from a menu of individual and blended mentoring supports that meet their needs.

“ Including the more flexible e-mentoring option means that settings are more accessible, without the limitations of time and geographical distance acting as a barrier.

Adapting the model to include this more flexible e-mentoring option, both in the current situation and in the long term, means that settings are more accessible, without the limitations of time and geographical distance acting as a barrier. In the medium to long term, a blended approach will be offered, such as e-mentoring, access to resources such as 'My Inclusion Plan', and face-to-face and on-site visits. Services can choose the type of support – face-to-face, e-mentoring, or a combination – to meet their needs at a given time.

This potentially extends the range and reach of quality improvement and professional development, in more efficient, accessible, and cost-effective ways. It enhances the work of Better Start in establishing and building a more cohesive approach to quality across the Early Learning and Care sector, delivering on its vision and in line with the goals and strategic actions of First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, working towards 'an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued' (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 110).

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The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has begun updating Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, now 12 years old. This article provides a background to the framework, then summarises the rationale for updating it, with reference to some national changes since the framework was published that impact on the curriculum. It concludes with an overview of the plans for updating the framework.

Background to Aistear

Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years and is based on a view of children as competent and confident learners. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed the framework through a partnership with the early childhood sector, including children (Daly and Forster, 2009). It supports adults in providing appropriately challenging, motivating, and enjoyable learning experiences within loving relationships.

Aistear is underpinned by 12 principles and describes learning and development using four interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. The framework can be used in a range of settings and suggests sample learning opportunities and experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children. Accompanying the framework is a series of guidelines on partnership with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

Rationale for updating Aistear

A central tenet of the rationale for updating Aistear is that it is a fundamental part of curriculum infrastructure and enhances children's lived experiences, having become the bedrock of good practice in many settings. Many significant changes that impact on children's lives and on curriculum context have occurred since Aistear was published. These include changes in children's lived experiences, national developments, policies and strategies, and developments in curriculum and assessment.

Some examples of the changed context are as follows:

Changes in the lived experiences of children

Children and their lives are at the heart of Aistear, which celebrates early childhood 'as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as

Updating Aistear

Reflecting on the rationale and process for updating Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework



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they unfold' (NCCA, 2009, p. 6). Children's lived experiences have changed in many ways since Aistear was published in 2009. For example, Ireland has become more socially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, and this is reflected in children's lives. Two years of universal preschool provision through the ECCE programme has led to changes in what children experience before beginning primary school.¹ More recently, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic adds to the rationale for reflecting on Aistear and its contribution to children's lives in Ireland.

Changes in policy and practice

Significant developments have emerged through policy formulation by, and initiatives of, the Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE). Three initiatives that directly referenced Aistear are:

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020 (DES, 2011) (currently under review)

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014–2020 (DES, 2014) and the allied Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan Q4 2018 – Q4 2020 (currently under review).

First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2018).

A number of other policy developments will also be relevant to the updating of Aistear, such as the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022 (DES, 2016), the STEM Education Policy Statement (DES, 2017), and the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (GoI, 2021).

Developments in curriculum and assessment

There have been many changes in primary and post-primary curriculum and assessment since 2009. The updating of Aistear will reflect the importance of continuity from early childhood to the end of post-primary education. Aistear was Ireland's first curriculum framework, followed by the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 (DES, 2015) and the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020). Aistear is a critical part of the curriculum and assessment infrastructure in the education system, and as it is updated it will be vital to consider how curriculum and assessment continuity is conceptualised, articulated, and achieved.

Stakeholders

Aistear's stakeholder base has expanded since 2009. There are now stakeholders such as Better Start, DE Early Years Inspectors, and providers of degree and training programmes that were not active when it was developed. It is now opportune to hear from these stakeholders on their experiences with Aistear, and also to reflect with stakeholders that were involved in the development of Aistear in the years leading up to 2009.

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (ASPG)

Early childhood provision is also guided by Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). Aistear and Síolta are interconnected, and in 2015 NCCA developed the online ASPG to help practitioners use the two frameworks together. Now part of the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI),² the ASPG is part of the national quality-improvement agenda and has particular relevance to the rationale for updating Aistear. As aspects of the framework have been illustrated and developed through the ASPG resources, the views of stakeholders on duplication, for example, will be sought.

Given these and other changes, it is timely that NCCA updates Aistear to ensure its continued relevance and impact in enhancing quality curriculum provision for our youngest children. It is important to emphasise that there is no intention to conduct a major review of Aistear. Rather, this is an opportunity to revitalise and update the framework to incorporate learning from practice and research, and from there to reinvigorate interest in, appreciation for, and use of the framework to enhance children's lived experiences in Ireland.

Outline of consultation

The consultation on updating Aistear will take place in two phases. Phase 1 began on 26 May 2021 and will gather responses to two key questions:

- What is working well with Aistear?
- What might be enhanced or updated?

Questionnaires for education professionals and for parents have been published, along with submission templates inviting all stakeholders to provide feedback. Depending on developments in response to Covid-19, a series of consultation events will begin towards the end of 2021 to gather feedback from practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders. In the medium term, these events will be online, with the possibility of face-to-face events depending on Covid-19 considerations.

Children are at the heart of Aistear, and a strand of the consultation is dedicated to gathering the views of babies, toddlers, and young children. This will be undertaken by a team led by Maynooth University. Additionally, a team from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, will conduct a literature review to update the research base for Aistear's themes.

The findings from these activities will be used to develop proposals for updating Aistear, and these will be the focus for Phase 2 of the consultation, which will begin in late 2022.

In conclusion

The aim of this consultative process is to hear the views of all stakeholders, including children, on how Aistear can be updated and enhanced. The findings will ensure that Aistear continues to effectively support enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children on their learning and development journeys.

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ENDNOTES

1. Early Childhood Care and Education Programme – the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's programme to provide early learning for children from 2 years and 8 months of age until their transfer to primary school (provided they are not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of the preschool year) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019). Over 95% of eligible children have availed of the programme (GoI, 2019).
2. NSAI is led by the DE in collaboration with DCEDIY, NCCA, and Better Start.

Children have the right to be asked to contribute to the dialogue on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Ireland. This article shows that children have much to say on the subject, if we take the time to ask them and listen to what they have to say. It is crucial, however, that while listening to their opinions, we also act on their wishes. It is hoped that this article will go some way towards fulfilling that ambition.

Introduction

A Child Voice project that I conducted sought to elicit the voices of young children on what an ideal setting for Early Childhood Education looks like from their perspective. According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), children have a right to express their opinion on matters that affect them. It is hoped that, through publication of their drawings and narratives, the children in this project will be given the opportunity to contribute their opinions on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

The project, a small case study, took place in a private, play-based setting in the south-east of Ireland, where the children spend time both indoors and outdoors every day. The children were all four years old and had been involved in the setting for at least one year. For the project, they completed an art piece based on their vision of an ideal Early Childhood Education setting. Narratives of the their artworks, transcribed by the teacher, were also recorded.

The consultation with the children was guided by the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007) and the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCEDIY, 2021). Throughout the project, consideration was given to *space, voice, audience, and influence* to ensure that the children were listened to and fully informed.

The children's drawings

Who (and what) comes to the setting?

In the children's drawings, we see the child him/herself, current and past pupils, siblings, and cousins. There are many children present, sometimes even 'hundreds' or 'millions'. The 'zero mummies and daddies' of the older children reflects their growing independence. For younger children, parents were included, showing how

If Children Designed Early Childhood Education Settings

A Child Voice project based on drawings and narratives by young children



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important an open-door policy for families can be. This policy had been widely removed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

One child's drawing portrayed a visit to the nursery from a farmer, with his tractor and trailer. Other children imagined visits from friendly witches, dinosaurs, and sharks. One child described outings to the local park, while others suggested you could bring 'any toys you like' from home.

Access to settings by families and visitors, outings, and toys from home had been severely curtailed by Covid-19. The frequency of their mention in the children's drawings and narratives indicates that these enriching events are really important to the young children.

Activities in the setting

The predominant activity in the drawings and narratives is play outside. The children engage in vigorous, active play such as sliding, swinging, and slipping. They also mention play outside with toys like bikes and swings. Some mention getting hurt during play, indicating that they see risk as a normal part of play. Children also describe dressing up and costumes, reflecting the value they attribute to sociodramatic play.

“The predominant activity in the drawings and narratives is play outside.”

Water is a common theme in the children's play in the drawings. It is associated with the most active outdoor play and correlates with the fun and risk associated with this kind of play, so well described by one child: 'They will slip and hurt themselves. They are laughing.' The children also describe natural elements such as trees, flowers, birds, and animals. As with water, their inclusion indicates how important they are to children. It is worth noting that children have the greatest opportunity to connect freely with such features while spending time outdoors.

What is also noticeable is that the children in the drawings have a lot of agency in what they are doing. They make little reference to rules, instruction, or limits. In fact, what emerges is a sense of great freedom for children in the settings they describe.

The teacher in the setting

A teacher is present in all of the drawings or narratives. They perform traditional roles such as preparing food, guiding children towards activities, taking them on outings, and managing the physical environment. Several children also mention that the teacher is playing with them – sliding down a slide and playing games.

It was interesting that none of the children mentioned learning or teaching in either their drawings or their narratives. In fact, the settings they describe appear more like adventurous play parks than schools, where children are free to play, take risks, and have fun with the support of a co-playing teacher.

Conclusion

It is clear from the drawings and narratives of these young children that they have strong and clear opinions about what Early Childhood Education

settings should look like in Ireland. But it is not enough to ask their opinions. It is crucial that we value children's opinions enough to allow them to influence decision-making. In this way we can empower young children and show them that we value their contributions.

Although the sample size is small, we can draw several clear messages from these children's drawings and narratives about both the curriculum and pedagogy of Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

First, we can see that some of the restrictions that came about due to Covid-19 have deprived young children of many enriching experiences both within and beyond their Early Childhood Education settings. It is imperative that these restrictions be eased as soon as possible so that children can continue to benefit from a broader range of experiences, which they so obviously value.

Second, the children obviously have very clear ideas about the type of activities they would like to do in their ideal Early Childhood Education settings. Active outdoor play predominates. It is often sociodramatic and sometimes risky and includes play with water and a variety of natural elements, as well as outdoor toys. Many settings have moved their practice outdoors due to Covid-19, a move often supported by the Covid-19 capital grant from the DCEDIY. In settings where children are not getting to spend time playing outdoors, we need to examine why, and to support settings to change their practice to meet children's needs and wishes. Some might question the educational strengths of such a setting, but research suggests that both sociodramatic and outdoor play, when supported by a skilled educator, have great educational benefits for young children (Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Waller et al., 2017).

The children have portrayed the teacher in the setting as a co-player... and this is something the children value and enjoy.

Finally, the children have portrayed the teacher in the setting as a co-player, and neither teaching nor learning is visible in their drawings and narratives. Research has shown the educational benefit to children of a sensitive teacher, trained in how to support learning through co-play (Fleer, 2015; Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). We can see, through the inclusion of a co-playing teacher in the drawings, that this is something the children value and enjoy. It would be worthwhile to examine how we can further encourage such co-play between teachers and children in Early Childhood Education settings, in order to meet children's wishes in this regard.

These last two points emphasise the importance of play to young children in Early Childhood Education settings. They also illustrate how important it is that we protect children's right to play, as recognised by the UNCRC (UN, 1989), when planning for their early education. While children have rights to both education and play, we need to be careful that, as adults who value education, we do not allow children's right to education to dominate their right to play, but instead plan for both to be achieved simultaneously. As outlined above, research has shown that this is possible.

As we continue to plan for children's Early Childhood Education in Ireland, it is vital that we take the time to listen to children's voices. We have much to learn from children, if we only take the time to seek out their voice.

(Children's names have been changed to protect their identities.)



Ethan

Do the hay bale trailer. Do the hitch. Do the person in it. It's an outside nursery. That's Alfie [brother] and Mum. That's Nicola [the teacher] and that's me.

That one is Mark [friend in nursery]. That is Billy the farmer and he comes to visit in the nursery in his new red tractor – it's a Claas tractor. At the minute he has a new tractor. He used to have an old tractor, but now he has a new one. It's a massive tractor. It has really long steps to the cab.

The steps are black. Nicola is under the steps. The steps are so long going up. It has big black wheels, and the inside of the wheels is grey. Tractors have to have cabs. There are hay bales on the bale trailer wrapped up in red wrappers. Some days there's a trampoline for the kids to use there.

There's a swing with a tree holding the swing. Now there's a dinosaur bulldozer. Bulldozers always have cabs. They have tracks wheels. They're yellow. Now I need to do the pusher. There's a plough at the back. Mark is beside it and he's looking at it. It has no door or windows. It's a old one.



Mark

There's a swing outside and it's raining. A storm is there and there's a door, so the storm can't break it. That's a roundabout, a massive superfast one. He fell off and broke his collarbone, like me. This school is a big one, so big – look! [Gives a long list of names of children in the nursery, his cousins, his siblings] and Mammy and I forgot Dad, hundreds of kids. There are circle beds for all the children to sleep in the night-time. Some kids sleep in their bed in the tent. All the children are playing in the night-time. That's the teacher in there. His name is Mr Dinosaur, name is T-Rex, Mr T-Rex, sometimes Mr Hydrasaurus. He tells them they need to play in the night-time and put themselves to bed. It's open when it's a sunny day, and in stormy days it's closed. Some kids play and some kids sleep. That's green grass kids can stand on and a door for a boy to go out, and that's a massive sandpit, a round one. That's a bell to ring so kids can come in. There's a cannon that have water shooter spoons in it, and it splashes onto a baddie with buttons. That's a boy pushing another boy on a swing. That's a classroom to get things from. The costumes box to dress up for dress-up day – Spider-Man, Iron Man, a boy with lightning cannons, Ninjago, Elsa, Batman. That's the waterslide with a slide and a pool at the end, and there's Mark on the top and he's falling down into the pool, down and under the water with the friendly dinosaurs – Hydrosaurus and Pyrasaurus and shark and a swimming backwards from Dinosaur Train to play with. The name of the school is Dinosaur Train. The children don't play in the classroom. They make pictures of dinosaurs and cut them out and play with them. A huge one to play around. A Hydrosaurus to go down the waterslide.



Lucy

That's a big giant swimming pool in the garden with a bumblebee who is friends with the witch – it's a friendly one. There's a big flower with seeds and pollen and that's bigger than the other. Elsa is the teacher. She's going on the Kilkenny waterslide with the kids. They're all going in the pool in their clothes. The water in the pool turns a different colour from food colouring. That's a dinosaur slide. There's a camera to watch the children in case they're being naughty, in case they hurt someone else. There's a bird that's getting dead 'cause a magpie is attacking it. That's Mark [friend in nursery] dressed up as a lion. There are loads of dressing-up clothes in that dressing-up box – flower dresses, wedding dresses, tiger, lion, some superheroes like Wonder Woman and Supergirl and a backpack to play. Twirly pools and whirling pools. An Elsa toy in the school that's all covered. Anna ones and Elsa ones and a flower toy with seeds inside it and pollen and a bee. That's a whacking ball that's going to whack the school. That's a witch that's flying over the school with a cape. She's a bad witch that can't come in 'cause the door is shut by teacher Elsa. There's a lock on it. Only she can open the lock. The witch isn't able. One of my cousins is allowed go, and my sisters can go into it. Zero mummies and daddies – just for kids. Apples and bananas and the teacher makes smoothies. The kids can bring toys from home, any toys you like. It's far away from big school and it's a nursery next door together so they can go into each other's school. One door for big girls and one door for little ones. The kids live there. They have a sleepover with their teacher. There's lots of animals in the nursery.



Jack

It's raining on the waterslide and there's a spider on the slide. Sam [younger brother] is climbing up the waterslide and sliding down into a pool. There's a tree with a tyre that's a swing. It's raining everywhere. They will slip and hurt themselves. They are laughing and the rain is making them laugh. That's me and I'm going to big school and I'm slipping in the rain and kicking my head. That's a tree with a tyre swing. Sam is in the nursery with me. Nicola is in the nursery and she is playing rainbow games with us in the rain. There is flowers and a tree there.

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The Power of Learning Stories

A meaningful tool in quality Early Learning and Care

This article highlights the power of learning stories as a method of documentation in early childhood education. It looks at some of Early Childhood Ireland's Learning Story Award winners, who powerfully demonstrate the quality practice that remained their main priority through the pandemic in 2021. Settings were creative, flexible, and determined while continuously offering quality play and learning to children in their care.

In 2021, children and educators continued to live through a pandemic. Educators used learning stories – powerful ways of documenting the reciprocal relationships between children, older people, and the environment (Carr & Lee, 2012) – to document the day-to-day wonderings and explorations of children. They ensured that settings remained playful, with rich opportunities for children during a time when normality had many meanings.

2021 Learning Stories Awards

The purpose of Early Childhood Ireland's National Awards is to celebrate the early childhood education and care sector and its contribution to the lives of children and families across the country. The awards immerse us in some of the most wonderful practices around Ireland every year. We receive learning stories from all types of settings, with numerous styles, attitudes, and curriculums. This article explores some of the winning stories from the 2021 Learning Stories Awards, while appreciating the ever-diligent educators involved. It also showcases emotional connectedness and the power of sharing stories to extend, enhance, and engage children in learning.

Ashvale Crèche

Ashvale Crèche brought us on an exciting learning journey with their story 'The Importance of Staying Connected'. It begins with an ever-present educator who heard the children bring their funds of knowledge on gardening into conversation:

It was obvious that children were interested in gardening at that moment. Senna was 'growing an apple tree from the seed' that he found inside the apple. Carla 'planted sunflowers and mint'. Louie's garden 'is so big that you can't take a picture of it', and his daddy 'is really good at gardening, he grows everything'. The popularity of this topic suggested that there is great learning potential within it.



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This natural way of documenting children's journeys, learning, and development links strongly with their words, wonderings, questions, and ideas, and this all begins with listening. Curtis et al. (2013) describe the kind of hearing involved as 'deep listening', when the listener is on the edge of their seat wanting to know what the speaker is saying and to understand the intent behind their words.

In Ashvale, the educator was truly listening, using the children's intended words to direct her role in their learning. She heard their interests and responded with the children by together creating their own garden:

The Starlights class and teachers got to work to get the space ready for seeding. They found shovels and sticks and used them as their tools. The children demonstrated the dispositions of cooperation, participating, persisting and independence.

Sands and Weston (2010) refer to 'wise educators' as those who see children as researchers, who explore the world with dispositions like curiosity and meaningfulness, which stimulates their discoveries. In this story the children continued to explore their many dispositions as they eagerly watched their garden grow and decided to introduce a scarecrow to watch over their crops.

Sands and Weston (2010) refer to 'wise educators' as those who see children as researchers who explore the world with dispositions like curiosity and meaningfulness.

The educator brought them further into this learning by reaching out to the local community, bringing the 'what next' of the vegetables into conversation: the local Lidl showed the children what happens with the potatoes in store. The educator concluded this story by writing a note to the children, bringing the learning and the journey full circle for everyone:

Dear children,

What an amazing bunch of learners you are. Well done for taking on this project, navigating your own learning through it and gaining new knowledge. You truly ARE confident and capable learners. Never lose your passion and huge desire for exploring. Your creativity during pretend play, problem-solving when building a Scarecrow, and imagination during A Story of a Potato made us admire your determination and drive. We hope that this learning experience boosted your sense of identity and belonging. You are a part of a big and friendly community; your parents and teachers will always support you in your learning Aistear.

With Love,

Your Teachers in Ashvale Crèche.

Cheeky Cherubs

Cheeky Cherubs shared an entirely different story with us, using different writing styles almost entirely around the wonderful exploration of children's

dispositions. This story began when the children's curiosity got the better of them and they asked: Why is our teacher small?

As the story progresses, we see that Gina, the educator, has a form of dwarfism called achondroplasia. The children's whys and hows leads this story in directions of true inclusion, allowing children to explore the many aspects that arise:

Do you like being small?

Is that why we need to put string on the doors, so that you can open them?

Learning stories (Carr, 2001) are observations of children's participation in everyday activities and settings that demonstrate their growing identities, dispositions, thinking, exploring, and communicating. This story explores many dispositions and includes children in conversations that help them understand and grow in their own identities. Gina concluded:

It was so heart-warming to see you all asking questions and truly wanting to learn more. We explained that the world is not always designed around everyone's needs, and we have to be creative to come up with ways to make sure everyone can use it to the best of their abilities. Children are often underestimated on how much they can handle; they are often shielded from subjects that adults may feel could upset them. However, children are adaptable.

Learning stories are observations of children's participation in everyday activities that demonstrate their growing identities, dispositions, thinking, exploring, and communicating.

This truly inclusive practice not only involves children in the conversations but also models a culture where it is okay to talk about barriers or difficulties that some people may meet in life. It models solutions, awareness, and togetherness as the children continue their learning journey:

I am happy that you're small, Gina, because I can hug you.

Sillito (2009) highlights that we must truly hear what children are saying, because to hear goes far beyond the act of just listening.

Maynooth Day Nursery

The final story from our Learning Story Award winners comes from Maynooth Day Nursery. It follows on nicely from the one above, as it emphasises the powerful act of modelling behaviour while entwined positively with the most wonderful learning dispositions. It is clear that this educator too was ever-present and active in their ability to truly know the children in their care:

Having learned so much about you before we met you, you were indeed tiny, as described by your mum, but what struck me was that you were mighty. You know what you are about. You air a confidence, you ponder what we say, you listen attentively, and you soak in the most amazing, interesting facts that interest you.

Aistear defines dispositions as ‘enduring habits of mind and action’ (NCCA, 2009). These are embodied in this story, which begins with the educator telling the child just how she knows her, giving a meaningful introduction that connects so well with the child’s learning dispositions:

When your mum sent me a video clip of you putting your dolls and teddies to sleep, I wasn’t expecting to cry, but I did. I cried because I felt proud, proud of Aisling, Hollie, Emma, Anita, and Niamh and of myself, proud because you modelled what you see every day at sleep time.

You sat between two of your teddies and rocked them to sleep, you checked in on them on each side of you, and you gently whispered, ‘They’re gone...’, just as Aisling does. You then positioned yourself between two other teddies, fixing them and reassuring them that they were ‘okay’, just like Aisling does.

This simple moment of play, which was captured by the child’s mother and kindly shared with the educators, demonstrates not only a pedagogy of care that is truly meaningful to the child but also an appreciation and understanding from the parents which acknowledges that they too were included. They understood that this is part of the curriculum and showed deep learning by the child. They felt the value of this and knew that it needed to be shared with the setting. This play modelled a culture of being that escalated from setting to child to family and back to the child and setting. What an empowering piece from a simple moment of play.

We try to ensure that we are good role models and that when we are designing curriculum, we need to be aware of the hidden curriculum, the one that takes place daily through our actions and our reactions. We believe this to be essential to the wellbeing, learning, and development of you and your friends.

For the child in this story, the educators in Maynooth Day Nursery have recognised that everything they do matters. Children are constantly learning and aware of their environments. They see nurturing, loving interactions and feel connected to these as they use them in their funds of knowledge that entice their play.

These stories, and the many others we receive often in Early Childhood Ireland, show a quality of pedagogy that revolves around a culture of respect, togetherness, presence, and inclusivity at its highest level. In early childhood education we are all on a continuous learning journey, as every day brings us new possibilities of learning.

In 2021, early childhood educators continued to immerse themselves and adjust to the ever-changing expectations in the pandemic. They continued to provide quality care to our children. They carefully documented this learning and play in the most loving and respectful learning stories, as they continue to document children’s learning and to empower them as learners.

“ Learning stories, by capturing moments in time, act as an archive of a child’s learning and development.”

Learning stories, by capturing moments in time, act as an archive of a child’s learning and development. Using them to document learning empowers educators to slow down and, in some case, to stop, look, listen, and capture childhoods. It truly is a testament to the sector when we see the quality through our Learning Story Awards shine a light on the practice that thrived in children’s play even through the challenges of the pandemic.

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Photo: Jeremy Bishop

2021 has been a key year in realising the ambition of *First 5* to develop an effective early childhood system. A series of major policy reforms for early learning and care and school-age childcare reached important points of development during the year. At the same time, government measures on Covid-19 have supported both public health and the sustainability of services while enabling innovations.

Introduction

First 5, the 10-year whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families, published in 2018, sets out how to develop 'a system of integrated, cross-sectoral and high-quality supports and services – an effective early childhood system – that will help all babies and young children in Ireland to have positive early experiences'.

2021 is a key year in realising the ambition of *First 5*, with several critical policy-reform processes for early learning and care being finalised. During the year, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has worked with an Expert Group to develop a new funding model for the sector, and led on planning a number of other major reforms, including a Workforce Development Plan and the National Action Plan for Childminding.

At the same time, the government has continued to provide a range of supports to early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare services during the Covid-19 pandemic, maintaining the sustainability of services while supporting compliance with public health guidelines. As restrictions begin to loosen, focus has turned to drawing learning from innovations in the response to Covid-19.

Policy reforms

Key policy reforms under way during 2021 include:

- Development of a new funding model for the sector. *First 5* commits to increasing investment in ELC and school-age childcare to up to approximately €1 billion by 2028, and a new funding model will be a key vehicle to ensure that such significant additional investment delivers for children, families, and the State. An Expert Group was established in 2019 to examine the effectiveness of the funding model in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable, and inclusive services

A Key Year for Policy Reform in Early Learning and Care

Policy reforms under *First 5*, and responses to Covid-19



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and to consider how additional resources can best be structured to achieve these objectives. This group will report by the end of 2021, and their work has significantly informed the package of developments announced in Budget 2022.

- Publication in April 2021 of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028, which sets out a pathway towards regulation, support, and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders. Up till now, most of Ireland's 15,000 childminders have been outside the scope of regulation and supports. Over the coming years, the Action Plan will bring significant benefits for childminders, and for the children and the families using their services.

- Preparation of a Workforce Development Plan, to be completed by the end of 2021, which will set out actions to achieve the workforce commitments in *First 5*, including ensuring enough staff at all levels of qualifications in the sector, strengthening career development and leadership opportunities, and working towards a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce.

Moves to establish a Joint Labour Committee (JLC), in line with a commitment in the Programme for Government, recognising the importance of wages and conditions of employment to achieving the ambitions of the Workforce Development Plan, strengthening careers, and improving staff recruitment and retention. While the State is not the employer and therefore cannot determine wages, DCEDIY has over a number of years provided funding to support services to improve wages.

- In December 2020, Minister Roderic O'Gorman began a process to examine the possibility of regulating pay and conditions and the suitability of a JLC. The Minister appointed Dr Kevin Duffy, former chair of the Labour Court, to be the independent chair of this process. On foot of Dr Duffy's report, and in line with the provisions of the Industrial Relations Acts, the Labour Court recommended the establishment of a JLC, and an Establishment Order came into effect in July. The JLC will provide an opportunity for unions and employer representatives to work together to determine pay and conditions. Budget 2022 announced a new Core Funding stream for services, which will help cover costs linked to quality improvement, including supporting an Employment Regulation Order that may result from the JLC.

A comprehensive review of the operating model for ELC and school-age childcare, also due for completion by the end of 2021. Following substantial growth in the sector over the past decade, the objective of this review is to ensure that the operating model is fit for purpose to implement ELC and school-age childcare policy relating to quality, affordability, and access, to the scale and standards required in an evolving and expanding sector.

At the same time, recent system reforms have continued to evolve. Budget 2022, announced in October 2021, committed to further extension of the National Childcare Scheme, introduced in 2019.

“ April 2021 saw the publication of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028, which sets out a pathway towards regulation, support, and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders.

The reform processes have involved extensive collaboration with stakeholders and have built on a significant programme of research and public consultation. Work on preparing the Workforce Development Plan has involved international collaboration, through both EU and OECD networks.

An OECD Country Policy Review of Early Learning and Care in Ireland, which began in 2019, will be published at the end of 2021. Public consultation on both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan took place in 2020, and further detailed consultation took place on the funding model during 2021, while a number of stakeholder working groups worked intensively in 2021 on detailed proposals for the Workforce Development Plan. Research and consultation reports related to the New Funding Model process are available at <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/>.

As the planning phase for this comprehensive suite of interlinked policy reforms is only drawing to a conclusion at the end of 2021, it is too early to assess impact. But there is no doubting the intent and the scale of ambition to deliver on the First 5 commitment to build 'an effective early childhood system', and the scale of additional investment announced in Budget 2022 underscores this commitment.

Responding to Covid-19

At the same time as progressing work on major policy reforms, 2021 saw a continued strong focus by DCEDIY on efforts to support the sector through the Covid-19 pandemic. Right through the pandemic, DCEDIY has worked closely on Covid-19 supports with sector representatives and with other government departments and agencies, including the HSE, Department of Education, Department of Social Protection, Department of Finance, and the Revenue Commissioners.

DCEDIY funding schemes were adjusted to work in tandem with the government-wide Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to support ELC and school-age childcare services, enabling them to comply with public health guidelines and remain sustainable. Sustainability has been a key concern, to ensure that services remained in operation for children and families who needed them, both during the pandemic (particularly for children of essential workers and vulnerable children) and as more parents returned to work later in 2021.

The sector was the first to reopen in June 2020 following temporary closures, and was the first sector to reopen without the application of the two-metre social distancing rule or the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), reflecting the importance of close contact between educators and children in early childhood.

The approaches adopted have proved successful, and that success in large part reflects the commitment and resilience shown throughout the pandemic by all those working in ELC and school-age childcare services,

“The [ECCE] sector was the first to reopen in June 2020 following temporary closures, and was the first sector to reopen without the application of the two-metre social distancing rule or the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).”

and by the children attending those services. Throughout a time of great stress and challenge, services have remained open and have remained places of learning and opportunity for children.

Services have remained sustainable, with no significant change in the number of services operating, while the number of employees in the sector remains comparable to pre-Covid-19 levels. The evidence also shows the effectiveness of the public health guidance – and its application by service providers and educators – in minimising the spread of Covid-19 in services.

As we gradually move out of the pandemic, attention has increasingly turned to innovations that responded to the pandemic and that may bring longer-term benefits. Two stand out in ELC and school-age childcare. First, there has been increasing activity outdoors, with many services taking advantage of funding made available by DCEDIY in 2020 and 2021 to enhance outdoor spaces. It will be important to sustain this transition given the benefits of outdoor activities for children's health, learning, and development.

Second, there has been increasing use of online learning methods for early years educators. Accelerated by public health restrictions on face-to-face training, there has been much innovation in ways to engage learners online, and high levels of participation in those training courses that have moved online. While many courses will now move to blended formats, innovations in online learning will continue, and greater use of online methods is likely to remain a feature of future continuing professional development (CPD) resources, especially given their flexibility for early years educators who are studying while working.

More broadly, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the importance of early learning and care and school-age childcare. This is a public good that confers significant benefits to children, especially disadvantaged children. It is also critical in enabling parents to work, both for those who have worked in essential services through the pandemic, and more broadly for the whole of society and the economy post-Covid-19.

“Early learning and childcare is a public good that confers significant benefits on children and is also critical in enabling parents to work.”

This article identifies the value of the free Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and explains areas where improvement would be welcome from a parent's perspective. It illustrates how the curriculum met the evolving needs of a preschooler who loves hedgehogs, and it documents a parent's journey from preschool in America to a community-based ECCE programme in rural Ireland.

The children huddle together on the couch of the preschool; my daughter is in the middle, leading the story on hedgehogs. I hear her cackles ring through the halls; my daughter loves preschool, and she wants to be a scientist. I know as a mother that I made the right decision to send her to preschool in Ireland.

We lived happily in a small apartment in Boston until the pandemic hit and my career as a Celtic singer ended. I had no work, and my return to Ireland was inevitable. I enrolled as a student at the local institute of technology. My first task was to navigate my daughter's care and education.

Finding all the information and figuring out my entitlements regarding the free preschool year and the National Childcare Scheme was a daunting task. Surely a one-stop-shop approach and an available computer for parents to enrol would help remedy the situation and make enrolment easy. Thankfully, a friend guided me through the process. If my first language was not English, I cannot even imagine how it would have gone. Knowing this highlights the need for intervention at school level or a mobile van that offers parents information and help to get services.

Attending preschool became an invaluable source of social, emotional, and educational sustenance for my daughter. She made great friends, and though she couldn't have play dates at home, she had them at school. She shared her new conversations, experiences, and the signposts of loving interactions with staff. She showed off her masterpieces, crafts, new literacy, confidence, and knowledge at home like badges of honour. My daughter adored her preschool teachers, and they were very perceptive of her moods: they knew when she was sick, tired, or full of beans. I always felt that she was safe and her wellbeing was in good hands.

We first came to the topic of inclusion in her preschool. There was a child with special needs in her class, and my daughter gravitated towards her

The Hedgehog and Me

A parent's view of early childhood education and care in Ireland



Kate McDonnell
Celtic Singer

wholeheartedly. She learnt to help her in many ways, whether it was walking, playing with her, picking up things that she dropped, being attentive to what she could and could not do, or sincerely reminding other children to watch out for her. Inclusion is an integral stride in our educational system. In these treasured learning moments, children learn that it is okay for people to be different, so she is learning how we all can include everyone at any time.

My daughter comes home with pieces of information about her explorations, such as learning about hedgehogs. She shows me drawings and a burrow made from a tissue box. She tells me they eat so many slugs that Granny would love them. She makes connections to Granny going out with the torch every night to ward off the slugs from the strawberries, to the hedgehogs being Granny's best friend because they keep the slugs away. This illustrates that critical thinking has become a major part of her learning and development.

My first encounter with Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework, was because of my daughter's interest in hedgehogs at her preschool. As a curious parent, I researched the video aimed at parental guidance to find out more. It took me a while to understand the curriculum. Expecting templates home, I was in for a surprise; my daughter's art was authentic and free-flowing, expressing the idea of a hedgehog.

“Preschool teachers are truly amazing human beings, and their role deserves more respect in the community.”

Everything clicked when I compared her work at the beginning of the year with the end-of-year offerings: this showed the progression of her skills, as the eyes on her hedgehog were perfectly aligned. The learning story about the hedgehog and photographs of making the burrow on the preschool wall shed light on my understanding of the curriculum; my child's interests are honoured.

Preschool teachers are truly amazing human beings, and their role deserves more respect in the community. My admiration and gratitude for my daughter's level of care and education are tremendous. Sometimes I have wondered how the teachers get to meet the needs of every child in the class, as the class sizes were quite big for preschool.

During the height of the pandemic, I laughed when my daughter instructed me on the way to wash my hands. 'No, Mummy, you put water on your hands first and then soap,' she exclaimed. I laughed to myself. Who is the parent now? The influence of my daughter's education is evident when I hear her sing a new song, use a new turn of phrase, and say, 'Look what I learnt today, Mummy.' Just seeing my child beaming with the sheer joy of preschool experience gives me great pride in Ireland's early-years education.

Sadly, because of Covid-19, there was no avenue for my daughter to meet other children or have play dates except at school. Probably one of the positive things that came out of the pandemic is transitions. Dropping her at the school gate meant she understood that she was in school once she entered. It helped avoid the teary goodbyes or tantrum episodes, and I am guessing the peaceful transition was less disruptive for other children in the class, as they tend to mimic the behaviour they see.

To my delight, as I am very conscious of what my daughter eats, her preschool room took a strong stand on nutrition and was strict on treats and sugary drinks. She savours every minute of preschool and gives off if I pick her up before tea at 3 p.m. Her previous preschool in Boston provided all the snacks and drinks, so in Ireland I got in the groove of searching out healthy snacks for her lunchbox. Sometimes I wonder if parents should pay a little more for a healthy snack at school instead of the bounty of lunchboxes lining the hallway. Friday is 'treat day', and my daughter reminds me to put her favourite snack in the lunchbox. Healthy eating in young children is known to have long-lasting implications for adult health.

One of the most surprising leaps forward in education in Ireland is outdoor play. Meeting my daughter outside, weather permitting, made me feel she was healthy and getting ample opportunities to run off steam. Seeing the level of activities outside amazes me, and I believe that Covid-19 may have helped propel outdoor activities for the better. I love to see her riding the red bikes and engaging in risky play. I believe we can and should do more of this; nothing beats fresh air for a child's wellbeing. Having an element of risky play is important, as it helps children take calculated risks and builds their resilience.

It has been a difficult year in terms of communication, presenting challenges for parents and teachers. Life is busy with a child; I drop her off, uttering a few words to her teacher, and dash to work. I would love more opportunities to have in-depth conversations with the preschool teachers about my daughter's learning and development. Not to overburden them with an extra workload, but if more resources could be allocated to working with parents, I believe the results would speak for themselves.

In America, the teachers held a conference with parents about each child's development before the mid-term break. The preschool gave us a development assessment form to fill out with our child over two weeks, and they gave us a kit to work with the child. The survey aims to identify if the child needs help with fine motor skills, so that the parent can work at home with the child. I found this approach beneficial, where the preschool teacher related the area of learning that I could and should work on with my daughter.

It was hard to go from the Saturday morning playgroups, meeting all the parents in Boston, to knowing no one in Ireland. I remember the vibe when I came to the preschool, and it had a great atmosphere. Unfortunately, parents needed a mask and rarely entered the gates, so making friends with them was challenging. Parents need more opportunities to meet, converse with, or make friends with other parents – perhaps a pizza night in the schoolyard, or offering more support to parents with their child's curriculum. My heart goes out to parents from other countries trying to fit in and do the best for their children; there are a lot of missed opportunities to include them.

Thinking about Boston, I miss the Saturday playgroup and meeting with parents for coffee and bagels. Still, I do not miss the traffic, the rushing

“ I would love more opportunities to have in-depth conversations with the preschool teachers about my daughter's learning and development.

“ Thinking about Boston, I miss the Saturday playgroup and meeting with parents for coffee and bagels.

around, and the steep price tag attached to preschool education. Early childhood education in Ireland is on the right track – I attribute a great deal of my daughter's learning and development to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Improvements in parent-teacher and parent-parent relationships would greatly benefit us as a community, as would improvements in intervention services available at school level.

Through the past year's experience, I realised that the ECCE is a vital free programme and made my transition from abroad to home possible and worthwhile. Now I get to spend quality time with my daughter and support her love of hedgehogs. The learning journals are a wonderful form of communication, documenting her journey through preschool. We spend magical evenings sitting by the fire, looking at the photos and drawings that she loves, and talking about her accomplishments as a preschooler.

Today she wants to be a scientist, and who knows what she will want to be tomorrow, but the one thing I know is that she is engaged in a quality curriculum that takes heed of her evolving interests: hedgehogs. The ECCE program builds her self-esteem, creating awareness of the world around her, exploring new things, and most of all making great friends in her community. As a parent, I am grateful that she has quality interactions with all her dedicated teachers in a supportive environment and a wonderful community-based ECCE programme in rural Ireland.



Traveller children, as a 'minority within a minority', face complex challenges of inequality and neglect in their access to early childhood education and care. This article provides an overview of recent developments towards meeting those needs at the levels of policy and structure. It outlines the key strategies at play and makes recommendations for future action.

When you consider the passage of a child's life, choosing to do little or nothing over consecutive years amounts to serious neglect of Traveller children's right to a supported childhood under harsh and inadequate conditions. (Murray, 2020)

For decades, no concerted effort has been made to investigate, develop, and implement appropriate interventions to meet the needs and rights of young Traveller children in Irish society. As a 'minority within a minority' (Murray, 2012), Traveller children have rights that are intrinsically linked to their family's rights, including their provision rights. It is no secret that Travellers have endured unacceptable living conditions that violate international human rights and children's rights (UNCRC, 2016; OHCHR, 2019). In the past 18 months, Covid-19 has placed a spotlight on many issues of inequality for the Traveller community, including in education, health, and accommodation.

In May 2021 the Ombudsman for Children's Office published its report 'No End in Site: An Investigation into the Living Conditions of Children Living on a Local Authority Halting Site' (OCO, 2021). The report outlines the conditions of 66 Traveller children and their families living on a halting site in Cork. The investigation found there was 'a failure to consider the best interests of children, including those with additional needs, and to ensure that children living on the site enjoy a safe, suitable standard of accommodation' (ibid., p. 8). While the findings are not surprising, as the inadequate living conditions of Travellers have been evident for decades, it is a very welcome report. At its launch, the Ombudsman for Children, Dr Niall Muldoon, said:

The conditions we found on the halting site in question were deplorable. To think that children in Ireland in 2021 are living like this is utterly shocking. Under no circumstances can this be accepted or allowed to continue.

Traveller Pride in Early Childhood Education and Care



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Neglect is also evident in the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) Report Cards, where government promises and responses to Traveller issues and rights have, over 10 years, moved between an E and a D grade until in 2018 a D+ was awarded, based on Traveller recognition as an ethnic minority. In 2021 a D+ grade was given (CRA, 2021). The grades allocated are based on analysis of how the government performed in meeting its commitments to the Programme for Government.

If we also consider the levels of discrimination and racism to which Travellers are subjected, at both individual and structural levels, we have a situation that requires immediate action. In 2016 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its concluding observations, said that Ireland needs to 'strengthen its efforts to combat discrimination against and stigmatisation and social exclusion of Traveller children' (UNCRC, 2016, p. 6). This accumulated neglect has damaging consequences for young Traveller children's life chances (Murray, 2020).

You might ask why we are addressing issues of accommodation, government policy, responsibility, and discrimination and racism in a paper on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Because our focus is on young children (from birth to six years), we believe that addressing critical social-justice issues is an essential ingredient in delivering high-quality ECEC training and practice, but it also requires commitment and leadership at ECEC policy level.

“The inadequate living conditions of Travellers have been evident for decades.”

Traveller children's lives are rooted in their lived experiences. The intersectional nature of the challenges facing the Traveller community must be addressed holistically and systemically. It is important for those working in the ECEC sector to be aware of, to understand, and to respond to the specific needs and rights of Traveller children, which includes addressing racism.

Two key strategies with the potential to make a difference for Traveller children are the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (NTRIS) (Department of Justice and Equality (DJE), 2017) and First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). They include cross-referenced but limited actions for young Traveller children to enhance deliverability of services, including accommodation, play areas, and ECEC.

NTRIS promotes the use of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) pre-school scheme from age three to the start of school, as well as the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for children with a disability, in the Traveller and Roma communities (DJE, 2017, p. 25). The action is primarily about access, which is important because we know from experience that not all Traveller children are attending or consistently attending the ECCE scheme.

Unfortunately, the only data available comes from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report published by Pobal (2021). We acknowledge the importance of having some indicative (albeit proxy) data for ECEC. There is, however, a dearth in disaggregated data generally for young Traveller

children which is needed to inform and target service provision more broadly. It will be important that the new NTRIS 2022+ have clear, targeted actions for young children beyond access to the ECCE scheme.

Two new and important reports refer to Traveller children, ECEC, and the need for specific training to support Traveller children's participation in ECEC. The first is the OECD's 'Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality' (OECD, 2021). This report recommends that 'ECEC staff would benefit from more knowledge and training on the specific needs of children from Traveller and Roma communities' (p. 35). It also recommends that further efforts be made to address 'other sources of disadvantage in ECEC, in particular for the inclusion of children from Traveller and Roma communities' (p. 16).

The second report is the 'Oireachtas Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community Report' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021), which recommends that 'awareness and cultural competency training should be provided for childcare professionals' (p. 38), in keeping with the NTRIS theme that there should be 'a positive culture of respect and protection for the cultural identity of Travellers and Roma across the education system' (DJE, 2017, p. 28). The report also calls for specific training, recommending that intercultural and anti-racism training be rolled out to all serving teachers as a mandatory part of their continuing professional development.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) already rolls out Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) anti-bias training, which is grounded in an anti-racism approach, through the City and County Childcare Committees. The training needs to include further components, including a focus on Traveller children. We have previously recommended that the training should be mandatory and its length increased as part of the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) consultation.

The report recommends that inter-cultural and anti-racism training be rolled out to all serving teachers as a mandatory part of their continuing professional development.

The final development plan has just been published (DCEDIY, 2021). The DCEDIY did not, unfortunately, include the mandatory recommendation but has committed to a review and further roll-out of the training. It states that the training will be 'facilitated by developing an online format for the training' (p. 99). This training was built on *éist* training, which is experiential in nature and was developed and evaluated over a long period (Pavee Point, 2004–2010; Duffy & Gibbs, 2013). This training, to have quality and effective outcomes, should at least be blended in delivery, in keeping with the WDP recommendation for *Síolta* training (action 30, page 97). In regard to facilitating deep reflection on critical diversity issues, including cultural competence and anti-racism, the online format is limited and can be ineffective.

We welcome the recommendations for a greater focus on training for ECEC educators on Traveller issues and anti-racism in recent publications. In moving forward, we recommend several areas for action:

- A National Traveller Education Strategy should be developed and implemented, and should include ECEC.
- Disaggregated data is required to target and progress service provision.
- The review of the DEI training should include a Traveller component.
- The DEI training should be blended, and all ECEC services should complete the training.
- Clear targets and actions for ECEC and young children should be developed in NTRIS 2022+.
- ECEC services should be monitored to determine whether ECEC frameworks and guidelines are working for Traveller children. This information should be published.

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Reopening, Re-engaging, and Renewing

A reflection on 2021



Dr Patrick Sullivan
Deputy Chief Executive
Officer, National
Council for Curriculum
and Assessment

Extended school closures, losses of learning time, and the stress experienced by children, parents, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers can leave us with a sour taste as we reflect on 2021. This article takes an optimistic view, however, pointing towards the re-emergence of education as a national priority, the agility of our system-wide response, the renewed focus on equity and inclusion, and the supreme efforts of stakeholders during this remarkable time.

Damien White, writing in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, referred to the time 'Before Covid-19' as BC and looked forward to a time post-pandemic which will surely have an 'Altered Direction' or AD. While we are still quite a distance from being post-pandemic, the Altered Direction of education is coming somewhat into view, presenting opportunities and challenges for primary schools and special schools in the years ahead.

The pandemic has, among many other things, given us the opportunity to look at primary education with fresh eyes and to consider what an Altered Direction might be in the context of a redeveloped curriculum and, more precisely, the consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

School closures

Paul Reid, chief executive of the Health Service Executive (HSE), in the early days of the pandemic referred to 'perfect as the enemy of good' during crisis situations. Acting out of necessity, he and his colleagues knew that the decisions being made were not going to be perfect, that there would be teething and ongoing issues in a host of areas. But these difficult decisions had to be made.

This was also true for the organisations and agencies supporting our schools. The second national closure of schools and early childhood settings in January 2021 is one such decision which, though undesirable, was certainly the right decision from a public health perspective.

By this time, teachers and school leaders had reflected on their experiences of the first prolonged school closure (from March to June 2020), put in place contingency plans for remote teaching and learning, further developed their Digital Schools Strategy, undertaken professional

learning in digital learning platforms, and established new ‘ways of working’ and collaborating remotely.

While teachers and school leaders were better prepared for the round of closures, the expectations from parents, children, the general public, and policymakers had changed. Their expectations were informed by stories illustrating the effects of school closures on children and wellbeing, the loss of connection to peer groups, and the realities of the socio-economic and digital divide. In response, teachers and school leaders re-engaged in remote teaching and learning with a renewed sense of purpose and focus: to maintain connections with children and their families, to support those in need, and to provide quality remote learning experiences for all children.

Despite the best efforts of all involved, the challenges of remote teaching and learning re-emerged. The realities of uneven access to digital devices; varying levels of engagement in online learning; the stress and burnout experienced by teachers, school leaders, and parents; and the social isolation of children from their peer groups began to present themselves. As our collective concern deepened, it seemed everyone was calling for schools to reopen and to stay open.

The positive reassertion of the value of schooling has been striking in public discourse since the reopening of schools in March 2021. This value is beyond economic imperatives; it understands the vital connection that schools nurture with communities and peer groups, supporting cognitive, emotional, civic, and social development and providing a place where children most in need are supported. In short, we gained an insight into the incalculable social value of schools and education.

“ We gained an insight into the incalculable social value of schools and education.

Reopening – the system response

If the pandemic reasserted the importance of schools and the need to keep them open, it equally brought calls for agility and responsiveness from our education system. In the early days of school closures this was evident in many ways:

- the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, declared a stalling of consultations and policy renewals from the Department of Education (DE) and its agencies in an effort to ease the burden on schools;
- the support services and Education Centre network provided an extensive catalogue of professional learning opportunities in digital technology and the effective use of pedagogy;
- the support and advisory calls provided by the Inspectorate;
- the assessment and pedagogical guidance provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA);
- the use of established networks such as the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN) and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO);
- the intermediary communications supported by school management bodies;
- the coaching service to principals from the Centre for School Leadership (CSL);

- the DE and the Educational Research Centre rescheduled standardised test administration;
- the funding for personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitisation, and the comprehensive guidance developed by the DE and its agencies.

Echoing Paul Reid’s sentiment, much of this support was put in place at great speed, and while it may not always have been perfect, it certainly showed our system’s willingness to respond to the needs of children, their families, and their schools.

An example of the government’s commitment to keep schools safe and open was seen in the expansion of the HSE school support teams. These consisted of colleagues reassigned from across the Inspectorate, the support services, Better Start, the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS), the CSL, and the NCCA and provided invaluable support for schools managing Covid-19 cases. Working around the clock, the support teams responded as best they could to the increasing case numbers.

“ Looking ahead, we need to ask whether our system can actively reflect on what it has learned from the experience [of Covid-19].

The reopening of schools in September 2021, coinciding with the peak of the Delta variant, added to the pressure on the system, and response times to schools were impacted as a result. While the successes or failures of the system can be debated, the reassignment shows the willingness of the system and individuals to step up in an effort to give schools the best chance of remaining open during waves of the pandemic.

These efforts were also evident during the recent shortage of teachers due to rising case numbers in the community and, as a result, in our primary schools. The measures facilitated by our support services and initial teacher education institutes, and introduced by the Department of Education, enabled seconded, retired, and student teachers to ‘step into the breach’ and provide substitution cover to schools in need.

Looking back on the system response to the pandemic in 2021, we can assert that the system was willing to respond to the crisis in innovative ways. Looking ahead, we need to ask whether our system can actively reflect on what it has learned from the experience and how it can build constructively on this learning to support schools in their Altered Direction.

Learning – what the research tells us

An important part of this learning process is to consider what the research done during the pandemic is reflecting back to us. The sheer volume and breadth of education studies examining the ongoing experiences of the pandemic illustrate the impact it continues to have across all aspects of our education system.

This was evident when the *Irish Educational Studies* journal published a special edition (Hall et al., 2021) focused on the impact of the pandemic. It was the largest ever edition of the journal, with over 30 papers published. Its wide-ranging themes include:

- implications for diversity, inclusion, and social justice in education
- the impact on curriculum, assessment, and examinations
- system leadership, leadership, and interagency collaboration
- schooling at home, online and distance learning, and outdoor education
- mental health and well-being for learners and teachers.

One of the most in-depth pieces of research published is a national longitudinal study, Children's School Lives (www.cslstudy.ie), being undertaken by a research team in University College Dublin (UCD) and funded by the NCCA. It follows a representative sample of 4,000 children in 189 schools through their primary school years. As the first study of its kind in Ireland, it is beginning to generate rich, in-depth insights into what it is like to be a child in an Irish primary school.

The study continued during school closures and reported on the experiences of children (in third class), parents, teachers, and school leaders from March to June 2020. The report outlines the challenges and barriers experienced but also how teachers and school leaders rose to these challenges and the supreme efforts they made to support children and families during this time.

Schools continued to access support services and also reported learning from other schools during school closures. Teachers reported contacting parents frequently about remote learning, and most children were very positive about the quality of communication they received about remote learning. However, principals reported feeling overwhelmed with the advice they received from government stakeholders, and with the stress of having to carefully manage communication with the range of stakeholders in their school communities – a finding mirrored in research by Burke and Dempsey (2020) at Maynooth University. While challenges were evident, overall the picture painted is very positive, where schools actively reached out and supported their most vulnerable children and families.

The impact of remote teaching and learning undoubtedly altered the progress of children's learning during 2021. And we know that some children have been affected more than others (Symonds et al., 2020; ESRI, 2021). As studies continue to analyse the impact of the pandemic, some will turn to standardised test scores as a way to measure the gap in learning pre- and post-Covid-19. And it is likely they will document the extent of inequity within and across schools, with schools that have more children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds experiencing a greater loss in learning. The pandemic has not been a uniform experience for all, and so the impacts will be uneven.

The value of schools in this regard is outlined by Hargreaves and Shirley (2021):

When we eject young people from in-person schooling, in the overwhelming majority of cases, we remove the counterbalancing forces that schools provide for vulnerable students ... leaving them at the mercy of the unequal environment outside of their schools. (p. 38)

It can be easy to jump to ready-made solutions to address the loss in learning. Some will refer to increasing time, and focus on direct teaching, the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), and the use of objective measures to assess progress. These responses have merit, but they address only a narrow set of specific areas of learning which alone will not address the inequality and loss of engagement experienced by many children.

For this reason, it is heartening to see the turn towards a focus on 'connection before content' in the discourse on losses in learning in Ireland. This was a feature of the Teaching Council's webinar series 'Learning for All' and was based on a paper by Bray et al. (2021) at Trinity College. Their findings highlight two things: firstly, that meaningful connection between teachers and children matters for engagement, particularly for children at risk of educational disadvantage. Secondly, when teachers use innovative teaching and learning methods and encourage the development of children's skills, engagement increases.

“ By reflecting on the research, we can see the precious space our schools hold in Irish society, and how we may have taken this for granted in the past.

Encouragingly, the focus on connection and engagement, and the targeted support for children most impacted by the pandemic, are seen in the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS): Guidance for Primary and Special Schools (DE, 2021). In addition to providing for additional teaching support, CLASS aims to support extracurricular activities to redress the negative impact on children's wellbeing and to promote a sense of belonging and connectedness. This is a timely and important example of marrying effective targeted support with an understanding of the broad impact of the pandemic on children's lives.

Each study undertaken during the pandemic provides an insight into our collective experiences, and as we look across this body of work, we can begin to understand the extent of its impact. By reflecting on the research, we can see the precious space our schools hold in Irish society, and how we may have taken this for granted in the past.

We now understand that we cannot do without physical schools and the sense of connection, identity, and belonging that school communities foster. They are places that can enhance and support wellbeing, human dignity, positive relationships, and engagement, along with providing equity in educational endeavours. These insights can strengthen our investment in and commitment to the educational enterprise as a whole.

Renewing – the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

As we look ahead from 2021, cognisant of our recent experiences, we might ask what an Altered Direction will look like. In particular we might ask what we have learned about what is important for children in the 21st century and how can this be reflected in curriculum and assessment developments.

In February 2020, the NCCA published a set of proposals, for consultation, on the future direction of the primary school curriculum in the form of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. This followed a process of engaging with and generating research, working with networks of schools and educational settings, consulting on specific curriculum areas, and

deliberating with partners in education. Fundamentally the draft framework presents an opportunity to revisit the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) as a whole and to ask:

- What is the *purpose* of a primary education for tomorrow's children?
- What *priorities, structure, and components* in a curriculum can support this?

The draft framework sets out a clear vision and a set of principles for teaching and learning. It attempts to highlight what is important in primary education and why, and it provides a description of what should be prioritised in children's learning. The proposals take account of:

- recent calls for curriculum change; for example, increasing time for existing areas such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE)
- suggested new aspects of learning, such as Coding and Computational Thinking, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, Modern Foreign Languages, and more emphasis on wellbeing
- the provision of two years of universal preschool education, and the publication of Aistear (2009) and the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)
- advances in technology and the world that children are living in, where they have ready access to information
- different experiences of family life, different cultures, different beliefs and viewpoints, and different abilities and needs.

The draft framework views children as *unique, capable, and caring* individuals, and teachers as *committed, skilful, agentic* professionals. Through this vision the draft framework's proposed aim is:

to provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them to realise their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society during childhood and into the future. (NCCA, 2020, p. 5)

To achieve this, the draft framework builds on the success and strengths of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999), including enhanced enjoyment of learning for children, increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning, and improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics, and science, as evidenced in national and international assessments. It also responds to challenges and changing needs and priorities in education by:

- addressing curriculum overload
- taking stock of strategies, initiatives, and programmes in order to clarify priorities for children's learning
- providing a link between Aistear and the Framework for Junior Cycle.

The draft framework places importance on agency and flexibility for teachers and schools, recognising the variety of school contexts and providing for environments that support the learning of every child. It aims to increase flexibility for schools in terms of planning and timetabling. For instance, it proposes up to seven hours of 'flexible time' per month. Each school would decide how best to allocate this time: a particular curriculum area one month and another area the next month, for example, or a local

project or initiative. Central to this proposal is the vision of teachers as agentic professionals who are well equipped to make professional decisions based on their expertise, their knowledge of their children and their school context, and the information they have to hand.

The draft framework supports strong connections between children's experiences in preschool and in early primary, and between later primary and early post-primary. It does this through its eight principles, the proposed key competencies that link to Aistear's four themes and the eight key skills in the Framework for Junior Cycle, and through the types of learning experiences described across the curriculum areas and subjects that would provide children with opportunities for decision-making, creativity, and collaboration. See Figure 1.



Figure 1: Key competencies in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020)

Children born this year will begin primary school in the mid-2020s, start their working lives in the 2040s, and retire in the 2080s–2090s. Taking account of the Irish and global community, these children will be part of the proposal's identified emerging priorities, which are presented as seven key competencies for junior infants to sixth class. These are intended to equip children with essential knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes, and values to help them adapt to and deal with a range of situations, challenges, and contexts that life will bring.

The draft framework also proposes giving more time to wellbeing, introducing a modern foreign language, broadening arts education, and increasing the focus on technology in a redeveloped curriculum.

It proposes a broad and balanced curriculum in both purpose and content. It proposes moving from subjects in the first four years of primary school to broad curriculum areas that support an integrated approach to teaching

and learning. To achieve this, the curriculum structure is in five broad curriculum areas:

- Language
- Mathematics, Science and Technology Education
- Wellbeing
- Social and Environmental Education
- Arts Education.

These areas would become further differentiated into subjects from third class onwards to reflect children's growing awareness of subjects as a way of organising their learning.

In addition to the five areas, school patrons have a legal right to design their own programme in accordance with their school's ethos, as reflected in Figure 2.

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

* 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.

Figure 2: Curriculum areas and subjects in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020, p. 11)

Finally, the draft framework promotes evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies, with assessment central to teaching and learning. Its focus is on fostering engagement, ownership, and challenge while connecting with children's life experiences and interests. As part of this, it emphasises the importance of curriculum integration, inclusive practice, inquiry-based learning, and playful pedagogy.

Assessment is presented as a central part of teachers' daily practice, with the information enabling them to feed back to children and to make important decisions about what to teach next, the types of activities to use, and how to modify pedagogical approaches to support further learning.

Looking ahead

Consultations on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum as a whole do not happen often, particularly following such a direction-altering crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic. It is now timely to reflect on our experiences and to consider the learnings and new understandings that we've gained during the pandemic. The research generated to date raises questions of:

- wellbeing of children, teachers, and school leaders
- equity and fairness
- our commitment to holistic and inclusive education
- the opportunities and limitations of digital technology and remote learning.

The consultation on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework remains open into early 2022 and is accessible through the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie) and social media channels. Now is the time to exercise your voice on the proposals for a redeveloped Primary School Curriculum.

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The Covid-19 pandemic led to exceptionally difficult conditions and circumstances for school communities. As schools struggled to cope and adapt to the ever-changing environment, having strong, positive, and supportive relationships proved to be a key factor in nurturing the resilience of educators and students alike.

I was privileged to work with many school communities throughout 2021 – teachers, principals, special needs assistants (SNAs), parents, and children themselves – and to support them in the vital area of well-being and resilience. I worked with individual schools and was also grateful to have the opportunity to deliver many webinars through Education Centres around the country.

The care and concern of teachers, principals, and SNAs for the well-being of their students was palpable: staff wanted to know how best they could continue to support and nurture resilience. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to share ideas from positive psychology – the science of well-being – and to reassure school communities that what they were already doing was so important.

My key starting point for school communities was to remind them that in order to nurture students' well-being and resilience, we must begin with staff. Staff well-being is sometimes overlooked – as educators, our caring role means we are continually looking after and prioritising the needs of our students. Yet you can't pour from an empty cup, as the saying goes, and the well-being of teachers directly affects students. High well-being in teachers is associated with higher academic achievement and increased student well-being (McCallum et al., 2017). In many schools, staff well-being committees played a more important role than ever in keeping a sense of connection, support, and camaraderie alive when it was most needed.

Understanding the meaning of resilience was also critical. Resilience is a complex, multidimensional process of adapting to and coping with adversity, stress, and challenge. It is reassuring to know that resilience is actually the most common response to adversity (Bonanno, 2005) – we are all more resilient than we think. This quickly became evident in school communities, as staff adapted and created new ways of teaching. Most children showed great flexibility in adapting to the new

Staff Wellbeing Impacts Student Wellbeing

Supporting resilience in school communities



Fiona Forman
Author and Well-Being
in Education Facilitator

protocols and all the new demands placed on them, and they also showed a new-found appreciation for school, especially after the periods of remote learning.

Such post-traumatic growth is a common response, and it was very evident in the teaching community. One study, conducted with over 400 teachers in Ireland, reported that four out of five felt they had experienced positive psychological growth and felt more confident in their online teaching and use of technology as a result of the pandemic (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). This was despite the fact that seven out of ten of these teachers reported feeling more stress during that time, which reflects the idea that stress can co-exist with post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2007).

Why did this happen? One of the most important protective factors in the development of resilience is the presence of positive, supportive relationships, and this is where most schools came into their own. This is the so-called 'ordinary magic' of resilience – a term coined by psychologist Ann Masten (2001). Masten, a pioneering researcher in the development of resilience in children, suggests that resilience is nurtured through all of the small, ordinary, day-to-day acts of care, connection, and support.

This genuine support and care, the sense of community and the deep bonds between staff themselves and between staff and students proved to be the bedrock on which resilience could be nurtured. That does not mean there wasn't severe hardship and distress. Being resilient does not mean we are immune to feeling fear, anger, anxiety, or distress – it is not about 'toughening up'. On the contrary, it is about being open to all our emotions and processing and expressing them in constructive ways, rather than suppressing or avoiding them.

This type of emotional regulation is a key factor in developing resilience (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Allowing staff and children the space and time to express, share, and regulate these emotions helped to normalise them. Schools did this in so many ways throughout the pandemic, in the period of online learning and on the return to school – morning check-ins, creative activities, and mindfulness, for example. The healing power of just being listened to cannot be overestimated.

During this time, many teachers and principals spoke about the huge weight on their shoulders – the worry and sense of helplessness at not being able to fix everything for their students. This was particularly true during distance learning, when teachers struggled to reach vulnerable students who were not engaging fully with online learning. One of my key messages was to try to take this weight and burden off through the use of self-compassion.

Self-compassion is a powerful antidote to self-criticism (and criticism from others) and is a key element of resilience. High levels of self-compassion are associated with higher levels of happiness, well-being, and resilience (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion is a key aspect of nurturing our own resilience as educators, and it was particularly important during the pandemic, because the challenges were greater than ever before. I encouraged

“During this time, many teachers and principals spoke about the huge weight on their shoulders – the worry and sense of helplessness at not being able to fix everything for their students.”

educators to recognise the wonderful work they were doing and to use self-compassionate phrases to counteract harsh or critical self-talk.

Another key factor in developing resilience is the presence of positivity. Positive emotions and traits such as gratitude, hope, humour, love, pride, tranquillity, joy, inspiration, and awe buffer us during times of challenge and difficulty and sustain and uplift us (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). We need a ratio of at least 3:1 of positive to negative emotions daily, because our brains' negativity bias means negative emotions have a stronger impact and last longer than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). With so much negativity to deal with, it was important for schools to be aware of this.

It was wonderful to be able to reassure teachers that all the small daily practices that many of them were already doing to boost positivity were helping to build resilience, for both themselves and their students. I encouraged teachers to tap into the power of daily gratitude practices, mindfulness sessions, kindness initiatives, and other play and fun activities which brought a sense of joy and happiness into the classroom. One of my big messages to teachers was that these positive emotions are not luxuries: they are necessities in the development of resilience.

It was so uplifting to see teachers doing such superb work in exceptionally difficult circumstances all through 2021, and to be able to reassure them that they were building resilience every single day through their care and support. The dedication and resilience of the whole school community shone through and sent a beacon of hope and light to the rest of society at a very dark and difficult time.

“It was wonderful to be able to reassure teachers that all their small daily practices to boost positivity were helping to build resilience.”

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Professional Learning in Education in a Changing World

Observations on teachers' engagement in online elective professional development



Ray McInerney

Director, Clare Education Centre on secondment from Principal, Ennis National School

Since the pandemic, Education Support Centres have provided a wide range of online elective professional development supports. The high levels of attendance and engagement are notable. The shift to online professional development began with an emphasis on digital tools and platforms and transformed to the use of these tools for professional learning. Online elective professional learning now has a place alongside face-to-face training and development.

Introduction

Education Centre activities include the organisation and delivery of a varied local programme of support, training and professional development for teachers, school management, parents and school community members in response to demand. (ESCI, 2020)

Education Centres occupy an important space in the Irish educational system, with deep connections and trust with local schools. Research corroborates that continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers is recognised as a key vehicle through which to improve teaching and, in turn, student achievement (Carr et al., 2000; Petrie & McGee, 2012). The complex nature of teaching and teacher education has also been well documented (OECD, 2005).

The impetus for teaching communities to engage in teacher professional learning (TPL) or CPD has shifted in the last two years. This has been an unprecedented period in many ways – in education as in every other sector. CPD is viewed no longer as a requirement but as an absolute necessity.

Change and reform are a constant in education. They are integrally linked to progress and improvement and are traditionally tied with curricular reform. A major shift occurred at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, when practice reform was initiated in response to a global crisis rather than to policy or curriculum. This article documents a navigation through the crisis, which has resulted in responses to educational reform that have influenced and continue to influence the CPD landscape.

On 12 March 2020, Education Centres found themselves responding to unprecedented demand for support from schools and school staff after the sudden closure of schools because of the pandemic. The initial responses focused on the new skills required for distance and online learning. Online CPD provision then evolved to meet the needs of the shifting educational landscape.

Change and reform take time to be embedded in educational contexts. Rapid responses generally lead only to surface change. The last two years, however, have seen rapid responses and immediate changes in the nature of teaching, learning, and CPD that have proved progressive and enduring. Changes were driven by the needs of schools, a demand for new skills, and an impetus for innovative and adaptive approaches to navigate the enforced transfer of teaching and learning to a distanced learning space.

The nature of this change

According to Carr (2003), the act of teaching is conceived as grounded relationships. But in distance education there is limited scope to ground relationships. At the heart of teaching are the unique needs and interests of students. The new offsite educational landscape posed significant challenges for bridging the interpersonal gap between teachers and learners.

Teaching communities' immediate demand for supports centred on ameliorating their sense of connection and reaffirming these grounded relationships. The key question in this new environment was: *How could teachers reach out to, support, and connect with their students?*

“The key question in the new environment was: *How could teachers reach out to, support, and connect with their students?*”

The immediate, simple solution was to develop online supports. The online space enabled Education Centres to respond – in line with their traditional remit – by stewarding the provision of supports and opportunities for local teachers to invest in their personal and professional learning. The aim was to develop new skill sets and to provide appropriate tools to engage in distanced education.

As a consequence, teachers developed the capacity to advance teaching and learning in the new virtual landscape. Their sense of connectedness to their students was reaffirmed, to an extent. An unexpected consequence also emerged, with teachers engaging with other teachers online through the vehicle of CPD, diminishing their sense of isolation in a challenging teaching space.

A new model of engagement

The appetite for professional development in the use of digital learning tools signalled a transformative period of engagement with CPD. Through online training, teachers developed familiarity and competence in the use of digital tools and platforms to accommodate new modes of teaching and learning. Traditional training rooms were replaced with virtual meetings, online workshops, and large-scale webinars that saw exponential growth in attendance.

This accessible model of CPD relevant to the needs of schools evolved over time. The initial emphasis on digital connection broadened to include a vast menu of contemporary pedagogical approaches and engagements aligned with school-based needs. This engagement is entirely elective, guided by the evolving needs of individual teachers and schools. Remarkably, even though the online space does not respect traditional geographical boundaries, the digital platforms served to strengthen and grow the connections between Education Centres and their local school communities.

Transformative practice

Learning is lifelong. For students to develop as active learners, they need to experience learning at every level of an organisation by witnessing teachers and school leaders as lead learners in schools. Feiman-Nemser (2001) observes that ‘what students learn depends on what and how teachers teach; and what and how teachers teach depends on knowledge, skills and commitments they bring to their teaching and the opportunities they have to continue learning’. Teachers can provide the elements from which success stories are created if they are given the space and opportunities to do so.

“Teachers' willingness to engage in elective online CPD continues to grow exponentially.”

How school community members engage in professional learning varies considerably (Knight et al., 2014). Recently a key challenge has been to provide a wide variety of online professional learning supports that recognise varied needs and enable teachers to respond to challenges. CPD has grown in the online space. What started with a narrow emphasis on skills for digital teaching has expanded to include wider provision in all curricular areas in both primary and post-primary sectors. The needs of parents as primary educators and of wider school-community members have also been supported.

During this period of transformative practice, changes in teaching and learning approaches are now being consolidated in classrooms. What may have been viewed as an interim model of CPD leveraging distanced teaching and learning has now evolved to enhance teaching and learning in classrooms. This suggests that online CPD is highly relevant.

Teachers' willingness to engage in elective online CPD continues to grow exponentially. The enhanced breadth and wider reach of online CPD provision have catered for this demand, and there are anecdotal signs of the emergence of a professional learning trend. Teachers are placing more value on their own learning, which aligns with the reflective practitioner model advocated by Cosán, the Teaching Council's framework for teachers' learning.

Rapid evolution

When distance learning dominated the school calendar in 2020–21, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) broadened their CPD horizons. The expected narrow focus on digital learning tools transformed to the use of those tools for engagement in CPD. The increased demand for CPD was

manifest in an evolving and broadening programme of supports provided by Education Centres.

The appetite for elective CPD was apparent in the numbers of attendees and in the requests for access to recordings of sessions and for follow-up sessions. The levels of engagement in webinars, conferences, meetings, communities of practice, panel discussions, online workshops, and additional supports provide strong evidence – anecdotal and statistical – that teachers and SNAs value their professional learning. They have shown a strong commitment and investment of time by voluntarily accessing CPD relevant to their needs.

There is evidence also of the evolution of online CPD delivery tools to increase attendees' active participation through polls, surveys, chat boxes, padlets, shared drives, moderated sessions, digital interactive tools, and professional learning discussions. Feedback shows that teachers place a high value on shared professional learning, the creation and sharing of resources and ideas, and the practical application of contemporary research relevant to their teaching practice.

Feedback shows that teachers place a high value on shared professional learning, the creation and sharing of resources and ideas, and the practical application of contemporary research relevant to their teaching practice.

The reopening of schools has seen further evidence of continued engagement in elective CPD. Educators should be celebrated for their extraordinary commitment to their students' learning and their own learning. We have seen the enormous investment of time by teachers engaging in CPD outside of school hours. This is commendable, as time is a precious resource.

Future landscape

Elective online CPD is becoming established, but it is too soon yet to ascertain its direct impact in schools. As with all change and reform in their early stages, there are many questions to be addressed about the future of online professional learning:

- How will we ensure it is a model for future excellence rather than a model for future convenience?
- How will online elective CPD differ from face-to-face CPD?
- How will active and authentic engagement in online CPD be facilitated?
- What elements of CPD can best be delivered online or face to face?
- How do we evaluate online CPD?
- How can we ensure that online CPD is a valuable model?

So rapid is the pace of change in modern society that most of the jobs we are equipping our students for do not yet exist (Townsend, 2007). It is incumbent upon teachers then to adapt and evolve, and to prize innovative thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. This requires engagement in CPD.

The present CPD landscape in Ireland shows that school community members are highly invested in the future of education and enthusiastically embrace their professional development, in service to their students. I would argue that online elective CPD has a long-term role to play in this

learning future. This does not delimit the importance of and necessity for face-to-face training and development, but it may find a comfortable place alongside it.

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Virtual Mathematics Meeting

City Connects is an evidence-based intervention delivered in partnership with schools and services seeking to meet the needs of children living with high levels of poverty and marginalisation. It is currently being piloted in ten DEIS band 1 primary schools in the North East Inner City in Dublin. This article introduces the system and describes its implementation in Ireland.

Background to City Connects

City Connects, developed by Boston College, is a 20-year old evidence-based intervention designed, developed, and delivered in partnership with schools and services seeking to meet the needs of children living with high levels of poverty and marginalisation. It offers a strategic, systemic, and systematic mechanism to enable children to meet their potential by having their strengths and needs recognised and addressed.

City Connects is built on the belief that every student deserves the opportunity to learn and thrive. Children can face significant out-of-school challenges that directly impact on their capacity in the educational system. City Connects' mission is to 'help students academically, socially, emotionally, and physically by connecting each and every child to a tailored set of prevention, intervention, and enrichment services in the school and community'.

City Connects, implemented in 90 schools across six States in the US, has been rigorously evaluated and has evolved to become an example of how the leadership of a higher education institution, working in partnership with schools, families, and services, can maximise outcomes for students and promote equity of outcome. Its strong evidence base shows significant outcomes in student achievement and thriving:

- better performance on standardised tests in elementary and middle school
- higher scores on report cards in elementary and middle school
- less likely to be held back a grade
- lower rates of absenteeism
- far less likely to drop out of school
- significant positive outcomes for English language learners.

For more details, see: www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/cityconnects.html.

City Connects Pilot Project

An evidence-based system being piloted in 10 DEIS primary schools in Dublin



Dr Mary Walsh
Executive Director,
City Connects; Daniel
E. Kearns Professor of
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Innovative Leadership,
Lynch School of
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College



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Coordinator,
Transforming
Education through
Dialogue (TED)
Project, Curriculum
Development Unit,
Mary Immaculate
College

With the right supports, every student can thrive.

All children can learn when their basic needs are met.

Many children face **obstacles** too steep for them to climb alone.

The course of development can be **altered** by external supports.

Individualized supports are necessary.

School leaders, staff, teachers, communities, and families can form powerful **collaborations** to support children's strengths and needs.

It is essential to monitor **progress** and measure **effectiveness**.



Figure 1: City Connects core beliefs

City Connects, guided by developmental psychology, recognises that if schools are to make significant inroads into equity of educational outcomes, they need a systematic approach to identify and meet the strengths and needs of every student across four domains: academic, social and emotional, family, and health. City Connects' core practice culminates in a tailored support plan for every student. It seeks to ensure that the right supports are offered to the right student at the right time.

Core practices of City Connects

Coordinators' core practice: building and implementing a tailored **student profile and plan** for every student, every year

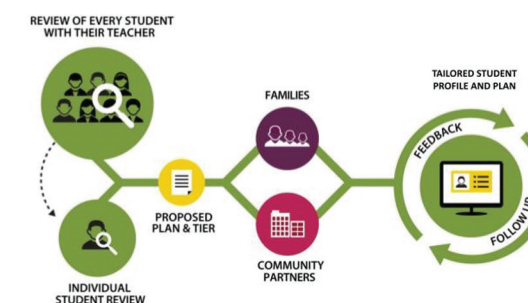


Figure 2: City Connects core practices

The core practices of City Connects are carried out by a City Connects coordinator (CCC), who is trained in the model and supported by a supervising programme manager. At the start of each school year, CCCs make a presentation to school staff and, in consultation with the principals and other key stakeholders, plan the schedule for the core work:

1. Whole Class Reviews (WCRs)

- I. Annually, CCCs meet with the teacher and at least one other member of school staff as appropriate (e.g., home school community liaison coordinator, learning support teacher).
- II. With parent's permission, each child's strengths and needs are reviewed at the start and end of the school year under the four domains – academic, social and emotional, family, and health.
- III. A tailored Student Profile and Plan is devised for each child. Children are linked to appropriate services, in consultation with key personnel and parents. CCCs continuously implement and follow up on plans, maintaining records in MyConnects, a secure system for capturing review and referral information and tracking progress. CCCs collaborate with school staff and community partners to provide feedback.

2. Individual Student Reviews (ISRs)

- IV. ISRs are conducted by the CCC in consultation with key personnel for approximately 10% of children each year.
- V. An ISR is implemented when requested by the principal, or when the need for a deeper review and conversation emerges through the WCR.
- VI. A tailored Student Profile and Plan is devised or revised for each student. Children are linked to appropriate services in consultation with key personnel and parents. CCCs continuously implement and follow up on plans, maintaining records of their work in the MyConnects system. CCCs collaborate with school staff and community partners to provide feedback.

“Information about each community partner is captured in MyConnects to facilitate the right fit for each student's interests, strengths, and needs.”

3. Working with Community Partners

Partnership is core to the successful development and implementation of City Connects. CCCs understand, identify, and develop effective school and community partnerships to ensure appropriate referrals, follow-up, and collaboration. Information about each community partner, including the type of service offered and its tier of intensity, is captured in MyConnects to facilitate the right fit for each student's interests, strengths, and needs.

4. Family Partnerships

CCCs, in collaboration with school personnel and others, communicate and collaborate with families or caregivers about student support throughout the year.

Throughout the school year, CCCs follow up on each student's plan, making changes as needed. At the end of the year, they use the MyConnects system to flag students who would benefit from an early check-in at the start of the new school year.

MyConnects allows CCCs to report on progress in the aggregate to the principal and school staff. Information from the system also enables monitoring of practice, evaluation, and research. During the 2020–21 school year, an interim IT solution was developed while work was being undertaken to bring MyConnects into the Irish context.

City Connects in Ireland

Mary Immaculate College (MIC), in consultation with Boston College (BC), initiated discussions with the Department of Education (DE) on piloting City Connects in Ireland. Representatives of DE, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, DCEDIY), Tusla, and MIC participated in a study visit to BC. Representatives from BC then visited Dublin, made presentations on City Connects, and met with government officials, school personnel, community representatives, and funders working in and with the North East Inner City (NEIC) Programme Implementation Board (PIB).

The NEIC PIB was established on foot of the Mulvey report (2017) 'Creating a Brighter Future', in recognition of the need to provide long-term social and economic regeneration for the NEIC area. Because the aims of City Connects align with recommendations in the Mulvey report, the NEIC PIB has supported the initiative from the outset and is a key source of funding for the pilot.

“Mary Immaculate College, in consultation with Boston College, initiated discussions with the Department of Education on piloting City Connects in Ireland.”

City Connects is being piloted in the academic years 2020–22 in ten DEIS band 1 primary schools in the NEIC in Dublin. The schools range in size from 60 to 405 pupils, and all include students from a local Irish background and students from a migrant background. Principals in the NEIC have consistently raised the need for wraparound services for children in the NEIC and using the school setting as the focus for supporting a child's strengths and needs while accessing external services.

It is the first time that City Connects is being piloted outside the US. The pilot is led by the DE, DCEDIY, and Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and is funded by the Irish government via the DE, DCEDIY, and the NEIC Initiative. In collaboration with Boston College, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick is the lead implementation partner in Ireland. Representatives from all the organisations above form the steering committee.

Staffing of the NEIC City Connects pilot project includes one programme manager and five City Connects coordinators.¹ All staff are highly experienced teachers.

The DE has appointed an NEIC education initiatives manager, who supports this pilot as part of his remit. A project management team comprising DE, TESS, DCEDIY, and BC supports and helps coordinate the subgroups. The implementation practice and training team, consisting of the

1. There were three City Connects coordinators during the 2020–21 school year; this has been increased to five for 2021–22

programme manager and implementation leads from MIC and BC support the implementation in schools, including weekly coaching calls with the programme manager.

Additionally, the Integrated Model of School Services working group, with representation across stakeholders, including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Health Service Executive (HSE) clinicians, guides and supports the pilot project.

The review and feedback evaluation carried out for the 2020–21 school year revealed that despite significant challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the ransomware attack on the HSE, significant progress was made in faithfully implementing the core components of City Connects.

We believe that City Connects has the potential to enhance the DEIS scheme through building on existing supports and increasing their effectiveness. From the beginning of the collaboration, Boston College noted strong alignment of vision, among all the partners, on core beliefs about what is possible for children and families. Fundamentally, City Connects offers a structured way to support an integrated services model, enabling services to respond appropriately, efficiently, and cost-effectively and enabling every child to reach their potential.



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Meeting the Needs of Children Most Affected by the Pandemic

A principal's perspective on how the pandemic has affected the education and wellbeing of children in a DEIS band 1 school



Orla Hanahoe
School Principal, Cnoc Mhuire Senior School, Tallaght

All children have been affected by the pandemic, particularly children with special needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds. I believe that the government response to these greater needs has not been enough. The pandemic has shone a light on the most vulnerable in our society, highlighting issues already present. This article gives a glimpse at how our DEIS band 1 school navigated through the pandemic, learning and thriving, and illustrates the challenges left to face.

Introduction

Our school is located in the foothills of the Dublin Mountains, a beautiful location for our community. Unfortunately it is one of the most disadvantaged communities in Dublin, if not the country. Unemployment, antisocial behaviour, violence, mental illness, aggression, substance misuse, poverty, and low expectations have long been features of this area.

Many of our children have suffered trauma and witnessed tragedy in their young lives. School is a sanctuary for them, giving focus and structure to their daily life. Our school is not just about education – it is about relationships and security, routine and wellbeing; it is at the centre of the community. For many children, it is the only place where they will read, write, and learn, where their minds are challenged and stretched.

The first lockdown

School ended abruptly on 12 March 2020, launching us into a world of uncertainty, fear, and isolation, a world dominated by the word 'Covid'. Our staff immediately sprang into action and began to explore how we could support the children and parents remotely, knowing that the school closure would hit them hard. Our immediate priority was to offer reassurance and guidance to parents. We knew that many of them would be unable to support their children's learning at home, that education would be low on their list of priorities. We were conscious of their limitations; our priority was connection.

Our home school liaison teacher and School Completion project workers connected with the most vulnerable. Many of our special needs assistants (SNAs) live locally. As the weeks progressed, they made garden calls: friendly, familiar faces connecting with those who wanted and needed support. Most of the children they support struggle to learn in a school environment,

even with an SNA and extra teaching support. Remote learning does not and cannot work for these children; they need human interaction with teachers and SNAs.

Challenges and resilience

We are lucky enough to be in the position to provide school-based counselling to those who need it most. Our school counsellor telephoned the parents of the children she was supporting and continued to engage remotely with the majority during the closure. The first children to re-enter the school in June 2020 were her clients, children who craved the support, play therapy, and reassurance that she provides.

The digital divide quickly became apparent. Many families engaging with us were using phones and had no laptops or tablets. We offered devices, but the uptake was small. Many of the laptops we lent were never even opened. In many homes the motivation to engage was not present, even when the intentions were good.

It was not just the lack of devices that blocked remote learning. In my opinion, many parents simply did not have the resources to manage their children's learning in the home. As the weeks went by, engagement levels dropped drastically. We were concerned about how the children would settle back in to learning after such a long closure. September was always a demanding month – what would September 2020 hold?

“Many parents simply did not have the resources to manage their children's learning in the home.”

Remarkably, many of my worries and fears did not come to fruition. Although I was exhausted during the summer from the preparations and anxiety about reopening, the reopening itself was successful. I was blown away by the resilience of our children, who quickly adapted to the many restrictions and changes in the school. Fully 95% returned to school on the first day back. They were so happy to be back in school with their friends and teachers, in a new normal where, despite restrictions, they thrived.

Of course, a number of children struggled with the return to school. More children were presenting with anxiety and attention difficulties. This was an issue before Covid-19, but the virus certainly contributed to an increase in anxiety and school refusal.

Children's wellbeing

The staggered, gentle start in the morning, the smaller numbers on yard, and the reduction of homework were transformational. As I supervised calm and uncongested yards, I marvelled at how we ever thought it was acceptable to have double the number of children there. With fewer children and more supervision, behavioural issues on the yard decreased significantly. Although staff now have double the amount of supervision, they say they would never go back to the way things were. The children's joy and their appreciation of school got us all through the other difficulties we faced that term.

Our priority now, more than ever, is the wellbeing of the children. We want to ensure that they feel safe, secure, and happy to be in school, and then comes the learning. When we assessed the children in September 2020, we found a massive drop in their reading levels. This was especially apparent in the younger classes: 47% of our new third class were not even reading at second class level. The proficient readers in fifth and sixth classes did make progress, which was heartening. But it was obvious that most children had engaged in little if any reading or literacy activity since 12 March 2020.

The second lockdown

Then the second lockdown came, taking us by surprise. Little did anyone think we would be plunged into the world of lockdown again – and my goodness, what a bleaker, colder, darker reality it was. As a school, we were prepared and ready to go. The children were all set up on Seesaw and Zoom. Books, work packs, laptops, and resources were quickly distributed. Arrangements were put in place for children who could not or would not access online learning.

“What a bleaker, colder, darker reality the second lockdown was.”

We now had access to our school building, which made it much easier to organise the learning. All we needed was for the children to engage. Many did, but it was sporadic. We realised they would fall behind even further and that we were limited in what we could do.

I believe that our children lost out so much during both closures. Their education and wellbeing suffered. As a parent of three primary school children, I struggled to support their learning during the school closure, despite all the advantages and resources I have. As frustration with Seesaw set in over our kitchen table, I thought of the chaotic homes that so many of our school children come from, and I wondered how they could possibly learn. The gap between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools was widening even more.

Resources needed

I welcome the Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS), which is being put in place by the Department of Education to help schools mitigate the adverse impacts of Covid-19. In my opinion, though, it is not enough. Our school will receive 19 hours more teaching than a non-DEIS school. This is disproportionate to the needs of our school. Only 56% of our children engaged weekly in remote learning. An extra full-time resource teacher is needed for the foreseeable future.

The pupil-teacher ratio needs to be reduced. The ratio in DEIS band 1 schools is too high. Many other DEIS band 1 principals, in similar areas to ours, have been advocating for a lower ratio for many years. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation supports this, but little progress has been made. The pupil-teacher ratio is 23:1 in my school and 24:1 in a non-DEIS senior school.

Given the complex issues our children face, this is grossly unfair. Now, because of Covid-19, the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has

widened further. The pandemic has highlighted the need for smaller classes. Many of our children have complex needs, and it is not possible to meet these needs in classes of 23 and more.

Conclusion

Our school, like many others around Ireland, is in a community that has experienced historic, unprecedented, and persistent levels of poverty and disadvantage. The pandemic has exacerbated these difficulties, bringing children into our schools with even more complex needs than before.

Investment needs to be made in schools like ours, DEIS band 1 schools that serve the poorest populations of our country. The core resource of schools serving highly disadvantaged communities is staff. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of human relationships and connection, of community, and of school. We need more teachers in our schools, in order to address the inequalities in education which the pandemic has highlighted.



Carmel Madigan of the Loophead Summer Hedge School has published 'An Ocean of Stories - An Anthology of Children's Ocean Stories', by children from County Clare and County Limerick. It includes over 50 stories, artwork and poems that were inspired by children's ocean experiences and highlights the major role the ocean has in our everyday life.

The Explorers Education Programme is funded by the Marine Institute.

The Importance of Communication and Movement Breaks for Pupils

How a pupil's unique sensory system can be a gateway to learning

This article argues that because of a rise in anxiety upon the return to school, it has never been more important for teachers to understand the function and components of a movement break. It discusses inclusion, communication, and sensory processing disorder and how these variables influence a movement break. It also shares recent input from teachers and parents.

Discussions I have had with hundreds of education professionals, especially in special education, always lead back to a simple question: What to do with pupils who find it difficult to cope? How do we cater for the unique needs of pupils aged 4–18 who present with learning difficulties; aversive behaviour; sensory dysfunction; traits of autism, ADHD, or oppositional defiance disorder; or signs of sociopathic tendencies?

And what of those who have a professional diagnosis? What of those who have a physical disability or a learning disability, or non-verbal learners who present with multiple disabilities?

Whatever the difficulty or diagnosis, the question repeatedly posed to me by dedicated educators is the same: What can I do to support inclusion and enhance the wellbeing of this pupil, who at times appears lost in the class, when so many pupils have varying levels of additional needs? Can we can help them to regulate body and mind and ease them into a state of readiness to learn?

Inclusion

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2011) describes inclusion as a process of 'removing barriers so that each learner will be enabled to achieve the maximum benefit. ... Schools with strong inclusive cultures are characterised by ... a commitment to developing students' academic, social, emotional and independent living skills.'

In a general context, inclusion is the extent to which each pupil is integrated in their own unique setting and supported to maintain a state of readiness to learn. The EPSEN Act in the Republic of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the Code of Practice in Northern Ireland (DENI, 1998) require the creation of inclusive learning environments in schools in Ireland.

Challenging behaviour can hamper inclusion and is one of the most obvious indicators that a pupil is not in a state of readiness to learn. Since



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challenging behaviour is unlikely to go unnoticed, it could be considered to have a valid communicative function (Durand & Merges, 2001). Irish teachers have reported that pupils engage in unique anxiety-based challenging behaviours, and many seminars and webinars are on offer in education centres across the country to upskill teachers in managing such behaviour and understanding sensory needs.

Common barriers to learning, or factors that lead to exclusion, include difficulties with literacy, numeracy, concentration, processing, retention, and computation; sensory processing disorders; challenging behaviour; and diagnosed physical, intellectual, and multiple disabilities – all of which are believed to contribute to difficulties with communication.

Communication and special educational needs (SEN) – what the research says

‘Communication problems appear to be a defining feature of people with learning disabilities,’ according to Purcell et al. (1999, p. 16). Meaningful inclusion relies on good communication, self-awareness for both pupil and teacher, and an insight into whose responsibility it is to repair ineffective communicative exchanges in the classroom.

Good communication can reduce challenging behaviour. However, Goetz (1993) writes, ‘the communication challenge belongs to those with typical communication skills as well as to the pupil who has more limited use of communication’. The more competent the communicator, according to Goetz, the more likely it is that meaning will be successfully and mutually inferred.

Communication is at the core of the curriculum and includes verbal and non-verbal methods of giving and receiving information. Interaction, far from being solely a verbal exchange, involves many elements, all of which must be taken into account (NCCA, 2007). Early learning includes perceptual, sensory, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development to enable a pupil to interact with others.

Topics of interest and choice-making are important when developing communication skills, where a good communicative environment will provide pupils with opportunities to interact with others, make choices, and become more self-determining (Clerkin, 1993). Choice-making for pupils with disabilities is ‘directly proportionate to the opportunities provided’ (Bambara, 2004, pp. 169–171), which implies that we as teachers need to be versatile, creative, consistent, and open-minded when working on communication and when discussing with pupils what movement break best suits them.

Sensory processing disorder – what the research says

Before we communicate about the world around us, we must first interpret through the senses. Sensory processing refers to how the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioural responses (Sensory Processing Disorder Network, 2000).

“Challenging behaviour can hamper inclusion and is one of the most obvious indicators that a pupil is not in a state of readiness to learn.”

“Schools are far more important than they are given credit for, but we have very little supports from government.”

The implications for teaching those with sensory processing disorder SPD are that the educator needs an insight into the pupil’s specific sensory needs when planning educational activities. Pupils with a sensory impairment – ‘complications receiving input through the senses’ (Slavin 2006) – may have great difficulty communicating with others (Pagliano, 2001).

Identifying and incorporating a pupil’s preferred activities into their school day tells its own story about their level of sensory tolerance. It may contribute to interventions designed to support inclusion, as we tailor activities to meet the pupil’s regulatory needs, whether this is a single-channel sensory activity based on visual, auditory, tactile, proprioceptive, or vestibular sensory stimulation or a combination (Snell et al., 2006).

Our senses govern our experience from birth to death, protecting us from potential harm and helping us to interpret preferences: favourite foods, smells, and types of movement, for example. The sensory inputs of a single experience may be liked and disliked in equal measure, such as the smell of hot tar, the loud beat of a drum, the taste of liquorice, or the experience of a horror film or roller coaster. Memory helps us to make sense of the world, as previous experience becomes a guiding reference point.

When it comes to designing a movement break, it therefore makes sense that pupils will learn to develop a behavioural trajectory as a sort of invisible management plan to cope with the external demands of the environment. They may cover their ears, swing on a chair, fidget, vocalise demands for attention, or run around when required to sit.

Sensory deregulation is often a barrier to learning: some of us find it harder to concentrate when there is a fly buzzing nearby, an unwelcome smell, or a flickering light. For a child with communication difficulties and a distorted sensory landscape, coping alone may supersede processing this sensation and articulating it as an inhibiting factor. Pupils create a repertoire of behaviours to help them cope, whether these are connection-seeking or avoidant.

Teacher and parent surveys on self-regulation post-lockdown

In a September 2021 survey of teachers working with pupils with special needs, 65% said that time alone was most beneficial when they needed to regulate themselves:

Read, go for a walk, go to the gym, watch a light-hearted show on TV ... I need quietness to gather my thoughts ... Escape from the noise. Breathe. Talk myself through the situation ... Need time alone to think things through clearly first before responding. (Teacher Questionnaire¹)

The other 35% said they need to feel connected with others to regulate themselves. One said, ‘I’m a talker ... I feel better after sharing ... If upset I like a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on if needed’ (ibid.). This is essentially the only thing that works for some people.

Children show a similar pattern. In a survey of parents, 57% said their child preferred calm or time alone in moments of difficulty, while 43% said their child needed connection and attention-giving experiences to regulate themselves. The latter parents described symptoms such as ‘worry, anger, feels sick, clingy, unable to communicate, nail-biting, tantrums, weepy, constant talking and questioning, seeking reassurance, pretends to be ill so she doesn’t have to go to school’ (Parent Questionnaire²).

When teachers were asked how they felt the pandemic had affected inclusion for their pupils, they replied:

Attachment anxiety has increased ... increased social/performance anxiety ... schools are far more important than they are given credit for, but we have very little supports from government ... lots of students feel very overwhelmed ... seem younger than they are ... anxiety levels are very high, lack of routine and social interaction has put many students back years in terms of behaviour and communication skills that they have learned.

The more sensitive children definitely worry more ... in a DEIS environment, school as their safe place has been closed too often and for too long, and children have been stuck on video games and electronics for up to 12 hours a day and with adults who were not coping themselves ... Increase in anxiety as a result of uncertainty ... It has really exacerbated some pupils’ anxiety levels ... routine is important for children to feel safe and to emotionally regulate.

Massively affected mental health and social confidence in our school ... pupils have trouble regulating their emotions in school ... caused regression, aggression in some pupils ... they are quieter and less engaged ... disengaged from learning, as the collective psyche appears to have a more short-term worldview, similar to a post-war-time era ... Addiction to phones/technology is noticeable ... trauma responses will become increasingly apparent in the coming months and years ... engagement with their peers has become strained and difficult ... how can one learn if one has anxiety? ... It’s made them less sociable ... I see a big rise in children having gained a lot of weight, and their mobility has been affected ... separation anxiety ... anger issues ... struggling with anxiety. Lower test scores, more school refusal. (Teacher Questionnaire)

“ Let us connect and give pupils tailor-made choices about their movement breaks before expecting them to sit in a state of readiness to learn.”

Moving forward, ‘feeling okay’ seems to be an essential component of inclusion and readiness to learn, whether it is cognitive, physical, emotional, or psychological. When considering a movement break for a pupil, let’s first consider variables such as communication skills, anxiety, thoughts and feelings, and the influence of the pandemic and sensory processing dysfunction. Let us then observe whether the child seems more connection-seeking or avoidant in their historic regulatory behaviour.

We cannot overestimate the importance of attention-giving movement breaks. Let us connect and give pupils tailor-made choices about their movement breaks before expecting them to sit in a state of readiness to

learn. That may involve going quietly to water a plant, or having a predictable, structured check-in chat with a preferred adult. We are all hard-wired uniquely, and we cope with distress in different ways; our pupils are no different and have perhaps never been so collectively anxious.

Teacher perceptions are critical to developing inclusive learning environments ... Positive, accepting attitudes create the foundation ... teachers feel that [this] requires inclusive thinking and action at all levels; adequate funding; proactive leadership; responsive support infrastructure; ongoing professional development and time for joint planning; developing collaborative relationships between schools and parents. (Shevlin et al., 2009, p. 8)

While a national movement is always welcome, let’s start in our own classroom, creating bespoke regulatory options for our pupils based on their unique needs. Let’s cultivate a warm emotional temperature in our setting in order to meet the needs of each pupil, to enable them to regulate themselves, to feel safe and to move towards a state of readiness to learn.

And let’s take responsibility for our own caseload during unpredictable times. That way we can teach our pupils self-awareness, self-management, and self-regulatory skills that they may learn only in our classroom – skills that may benefit them for a lifetime.

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ENDNOTES

1. Teacher Questionnaire – Teacher and Pupil Wellbeing <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gjfot3xK-tYcld9dCAexgX3BNjDwNjoqBWygSRxZb0g/edit>
2. Parent Questionnaire – Child Wellbeing <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1QwFTi63HjNygUCxp6gxwtProUebbL6XnXUKHaFhHHhU/edit>

Diversity and the Teaching Profession

Migrant teachers' perspectives and expertise will benefit our education system for many years to come



Dr Garret Campbell

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Migrant teachers present a variety of great opportunities for schools and students in Ireland. As well as their considerable qualifications, they bring a new dimension to classrooms, with a diversity of perspectives and expertise that will benefit our children and our education system for many years to come.

Introduction

In August 2021, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) reported that the population of Ireland tipped over 5 million at the end of April 2021. It was the highest recorded population since the 1851 census and the first time it had surpassed 5 million since the aftermath of the Famine. This milestone was reached by a combination of net migration and natural increase.

Six million people left Ireland between 1841 and 1900. By 1901, Ireland's population had been cut in half, to just 4.4 million. Further mass emigration followed in the 1950s and 1980s. Yet despite this long history of emigration, there continues to be a slow official response to immigration. According to the CSO, 87.1% of the people who now live in Ireland are Irish nationals; the remaining 12.9% are non-Irish nationals.

Migration is part of who and what we are

Migration, whether forced or chosen, is part of the world in which we live. Most recently we witnessed harrowing scenes from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, while inflatable rafts drifting from North Africa towards Europe are unfortunately commonplace. It is estimated that more than 300 million international migrants are currently on the move.

Despite the horrors to which we are becoming dangerously desensitised, most migrants leave their home countries for reasons of work. We cannot deny that millions have been driven from their homes by conflict, violence, and climate change, but labour mobility is increasing both across Europe and globally. This is matched by mobility in the teaching profession and is as true for Ireland as anywhere else.

Absolute numbers are not currently available, but data gathered by the Migrant Teacher Project at Marino Institute of Education indicates there are at least 2,000 people in Ireland who have identified themselves as migrant teachers – that

is, they believe they have qualified-teacher status from the country where they received their qualifications, are now living in Ireland, and want to join the teaching profession here.

It is reasonable to assume there are many more migrant teachers who have not yet engaged with the project or are unaware of the work we do. But in a time of teacher shortage, it is worth drawing attention to this rich and diverse group of teachers in Ireland who are not contributing, in the way they want to, to the country they now call home.

Diversity in the teaching profession

There are 65,815 teachers in Ireland: 28,474 primary and 37,341 post-primary. This represents an increase of around 13% in the last seven years. There are over a million children in school – 567,772 in primary, 362,899 in post-primary, and 108,188 in preschool – and about 1.3 million students if higher education is included. About 10% of these are from ethnic minorities.

Despite the demographic change in Irish classrooms and lecture halls, the teaching profession remains fairly homogenous and dominated by WHISCs: White, Heterosexual, Irish-born, Settled Catholics (a useful acronym developed by Marshall Tracy in his MPhil dissertation at Trinity College Dublin more than 20 years ago). Later research by Elaine Keane and Manuela Heinz of NUI Galway in 2015 indicates that this homogeneity is not changing through Initial Teacher Education (ITE), despite the changes in Irish society.

Walking around the campus of any teacher-education institute today would support this and would seem to confirm the suspicion that migrant teachers are not entering the system quickly enough and that students from ethnic minorities are not entering the teaching profession either. It could be argued, then, that minority ethnic children do not see teachers who look like themselves in Irish schools, and by extension they do not have the role models to inspire them into the profession.

“The teaching profession remains fairly homogenous and dominated by WHISCs: White, Heterosexual, Irish-born, Settled Catholics (a useful acronym developed by Marshall Tracy in his MPhil dissertation).”

Recognising international qualifications

Under EU Directive 2005/36/EC, teachers who have fully qualified outside of Ireland are eligible to apply for registration with the Teaching Council. The Council will register teachers, whether from within or outside the EU, who have already obtained qualified teacher status – that is, that they are fully qualified at primary or post-primary level in the country in which they completed their ITE qualification, and have completed any period of statutory post-qualification induction or probation.

The Teaching Council will request documentation: transcripts, module descriptors, course handbooks, and so on, along with official letters from the relevant teacher registration body, competent authority, or Ministry of Education, confirming recognition as a fully qualified teacher in the particular State or country. The Council will then assess the qualifications to see if they are in line with standards in the Irish system. If they are, the

teacher will be registered. More often than not, however, the Council may identify conditions or qualification shortfalls to be addressed.

For example, overseas-qualified primary school teachers are required to reach a certain standard in the Irish language, while both primary and post-primary teachers are required to complete an exam in the history and structure of the Irish education system before being fully registered. When registered this way, with such conditions, a teacher is then given time, usually three years, to address any shortfalls identified. During this time, it is possible for the teacher to work as a teacher in a recognised school.

Barriers to entry

Despite this seemingly straightforward process, many migrant teachers identify barriers to entry into the Irish teaching workforce. Despite efforts by the Teaching Council, many perceive the registration process as one of the most challenging barriers. This is not helped by negative discourse around registration, which can discourage migrant teachers from even engaging with it in the first place. But when the process is unpacked a little, what are identified as ‘barriers’ created by the Teaching Council are more nuanced and can be more about a mismatch between qualifications held and qualifications required, rather than an institutional refusal to accept certain qualifications.

Another issue is around what can seem like endless back and forth between the applicant and the Teaching Council, with request after request for more documentation. Again, when unpacked, it is often not fully clear to applicants that they must have all their documents gathered and translated before commencing the process. If an application is made with only some of the required documentation, the Council will make further requests, and this can seriously slow things down.

The Council’s recent announcement of a ‘new and enhanced MyRegistration portal’ is welcome. It is hoped this will bring enhanced services and greater convenience for registered teachers, who will be able to access and manage registration information online rather than a ‘download and fill out’ arrangement. Hopefully it will improve online submission, with the ability to upload documents with a real-time response. This would reduce the unknown element of what is currently, for many migrant teachers, a blind submission of what they hope are the correct documents.

This being said, the language used on the Teaching Council website does not help: it can be quite technical and specific to an Irish understanding of teacher education. It would be important for the revised portal to take cognisance of that. Confusion certainly arises in distinguishing between transcripts, modular descriptors, and course handbooks, for example. This can be further confounded when the institution that issued the original qualification does not use the same vocabulary.

In an attempt to remove these obstacles, the Migrant Teacher Project is working closely with the Teaching Council to establish a glossary of terms identified as problematic. This will then be publicised by both the Council and the Migrant Teacher Project. The voice of migrant teachers will be important to get this right.

Accessing documentation from outside Ireland

It is unhelpful to assume that accessing documentation from qualifying institutions outside of Ireland is always straightforward. At a basic level, there can be difficulties in contacting the institution or the right person there – central administration blocks with integrated IT are not always commonplace. Some institutions no longer exist or have amalgamated, changed name, changed status, or variations on that theme.

This is a particular though not unique challenge for teachers coming from certain war-torn or conflict countries; it can also be an issue for Eastern European teachers and has been one for some EU citizens. The challenge can be amplified if the teacher qualified some time ago, when record-keeping may have been very different.

In some cases it is simply not possible to obtain the necessary documentation, and the Teaching Council reserves the right to use an affidavit in such circumstances. While this must be reserved as a last resort, it is important that the pathway to the affidavit be made clear to the migrant teacher early in the registration journey, so that they fully understand that if all else fails, they have a further option than to simply give up; unfortunately many do.

Conditional registration

When conditional registration is granted, it is possible for the teacher to teach in a recognised school, as they will have a Teaching Council number and are effectively registered, albeit with qualification shortfalls. They will typically have three years to complete these. Understanding how to complete shortfalls is often less than clear, however, because the Council does not draw a line between the shortfall, the ITE courses in which this shortfall can be found, and the institutes where this can be done. Typically, the shortfall is identified and a list of potential ITE institutions is given. A lot of additional research is then needed, and this can be a daunting prospect for many.

Initial research done by the Migrant Teacher Project indicates that ‘who you know’ rather than ‘what you know’ may be the final arbiter in deciding who gets a particular job.

Céim, the Standards for Initial Teacher Education, sets out the requirements that all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet to gain accreditation from the Teaching Council. It is hoped this will streamline the process, so that teachers with qualification shortfalls can more easily navigate this environment. Again, the Migrant Teacher Project is actively involved in discussions on this and intends to develop a user-friendly resource in association with the Teaching Council to help migrant teachers find the courses they need.

Being a teacher in Ireland

Many migrant teachers find it difficult to navigate the many nuances of teacher recruitment: the acronyms, the structure and layout of the job advertisement, the application form versus CV, the autonomous nature of schools, the role that religion might play, and so on. Initial research done by the Migrant Teacher Project indicated, perhaps not too surprisingly, that ‘who you know’ rather than ‘what you know’ may be the final arbiter in deciding who gets a particular job.

The Migrant Teacher Project aims to increase migrant teachers’ participation in Irish primary and post-primary schools. The project was established by Marino Institute of Education and co-financed by the European Commission under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014–2020, through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and by the Department of Education. It provides information, advice, training, and support to migrant teachers who have qualified outside of Ireland, to help them continue their profession in Ireland.

As part of this, we have devised a bridging programme called ‘Being a Teacher in Ireland’. This part-time course is separate from the Teaching Council registration process. It is aimed at migrant teachers who have already completed, or nearly completed, registration, and it does not aim to address any particular ‘shortfalls’ identified for individuals. Instead it gives participants an opportunity to supplement their qualifications with local knowledge and peer supports, and to spend time in an Irish school setting and begin building their own professional networks.

Conclusion

One important goal of diversity is to create a culture where individual differences are respected and all are treated equally and receive the same opportunities for growth and progression. Diversity in our society, our workforce, and the teaching profession makes for a diverse array of talent, perspective, and standpoint. In a recent Forbes survey, more than half of companies with more than \$10bn in annual revenue strongly agreed that diversity helps drive innovation: people with different experiences bring those experiences and perspectives with them.

Migrant teachers present a variety of great opportunities for schools and students in Ireland. As well as their considerable qualifications, they bring a new dimension to classrooms, with a diversity of perspectives and expertise that will benefit our children and our education system for many years to come. Research shows there are huge benefits to having a diverse teaching population – not just for children from minority backgrounds, but for all children, and for all schools.

Through our bridging programme and other activities, the Migrant Teacher Project has worked with hundreds of migrant teachers and schools to help those teachers continue their teaching journey in Ireland. In further developing this work, the project has launched a formal school network. This will support migrant teachers as they seek school experience and employment, and it will support schools as they both support the migrant teachers and challenge the prevailing cultural barriers those teachers experience.

Support and training will be offered to these schools as they become key advocates in the system, promoting the benefits of integrating and including migrant teachers in the Irish teaching workforce. For more information on the Migrant Teacher Project, or to be part of this change leadership, go to: www.mie.ie/en/research/research_projects/migrant_teacher_project/.

The experience of LGBT+ people in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade. This article examines how LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families currently experience Irish primary schools, and the implications of this for future decisions by educators, school leaders, academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Introduction

The experience of LGBT+ people in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade. The introduction of same-sex civil partnership in 2011, followed by the successful referendum on same-sex marriage in May 2015, gave a legal basis to same-sex relationships for the first time. The passing of the Gender Recognition Act in July 2015 allowed transgender people over the age of 18 to self-declare their own gender identity. The Act, however, made no provision for intersex people, non-binary people, or those under 16. Similarly, the Children and Family Relationships Act, enacted in May 2020, gave legal protection to some LGBT+ families, but major gaps still exist.

From an education perspective, the amendment to Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act of 1998 via the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act in December 2015 marked a significant advance in protections for LGBT+ teachers in religious-run schools, and the inclusion of homophobic and transphobic bullying in the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, issued by the Department of Education and Skills in 2013, marked a commitment to improving the experiences of LGBT+ pupils in Irish schools.

This article will explore how LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families currently experience Irish primary schools, and the implications of this for future decisions by educators, school leaders, academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Diversity in the LGBT+ community

The LGBT+ community is often presented as a unified entity, but it consists of diverse individuals with many disparate experiences. Aside from the sexual and gender identities represented directly in the initialism (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), it also includes people who are queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, non-binary, and gender-fluid, among others.

Being LGBT+ in Irish Primary Schools

Sunshine and rainbows, or storm clouds ahead?



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These identities can also intersect: a person can be both intersex and transgender, or both non-binary and pansexual, for example. Being LGBT+ can also intersect with other identities, such as ethnicity, religion, neurodiversity, membership of the Travelling or Roma community, or socioeconomic class. There is no single 'LGBT+ experience'.

Research in this area has increased in recent years, but not all experiences in the community have been captured equally: (white) gay and lesbian experiences are the most prominent, especially from a school staff perspective. Significant omissions include the experiences of intersex, asexual, and non-binary people. Research on LGBT+ experiences of primary pupils is almost completely absent. But the research that is available can give some insight into what it is like to be LGBT+ in our schools, and can signal actions that are necessary to make our schools more inclusive.

LGBT+ staff

With the developments mentioned above, one could be forgiven for thinking that 'all has been solved' for LGBT+ school staff. Egan and McDaid (2019), however, found that despite positive experiences of recognition in schools around the time of the marriage equality referendum, this progress was fragile and it dissipated once the referendum had passed. Similarly, Neary (2020) highlighted how legislative change can often prove ineffective at tackling the complexities of injustice and deeply ingrained heteronormativity in school environments.¹

Research carried out by the INTO Equality Committee found that only 18% of LGBT+ teachers were fully 'out' in their schools and that 40% were not out at all (INTO, 2020).

Research carried out by the INTO Equality Committee found that only 18% of LGBT+ teachers were fully 'out' in their schools (i.e., to staff, parents or guardians, and pupils) and that 40% were not out at all (INTO, 2020). For some, being openly LGBT+ was not regarded as a difficulty, but others – especially in schools with religious patronage – expressed concern about the reaction of their boards of management and of parents. This is significant, given that 94.2% of primary schools in Ireland are under religious patronage (Department of Education, 2020).

The national LGBTIreland study found that only 75% of respondents would feel comfortable with their child's teacher being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Higgins et al., 2016). This figure dropped to 63% if the teacher was transgender. This may contribute to the uncertainty that some LGBT+ staff feel about being out in their school community.

Action Points

- School management need to ensure proactive, inclusive messaging to create safe spaces for LGBT+ staff; 80% of teachers saw the principal as essential in this process (INTO, 2020). LGBT+ teachers indicated that seeing LGBT+-inclusive resources on display in the environment provided a significant level of comfort that their identity was accepted.
- Strong LGBT+-inclusive statements from religious patron bodies would significantly reduce the uncertainty felt by LGBT+ staff in these schools.

- Educational stakeholders, including the Department of Education, the Teaching Council, and training providers, should conduct an LGBT+-inclusive audit of their systems: Can non-binary teachers choose an honorific that matches their identity on online forms or registration, and so on.
- Further research is needed to accurately capture the voices of those absent from current research, especially intersex, asexual, transgender, and non-binary staff, and LGBT+ people who discounted teaching as a career due to their experiences in school.

LGBT+ pupils and families

Research is scarce on the experiences of LGBT+ pupils or of pupils in LGBT+-headed families in Irish primary schools. At second level, schools are often not positive environments for LGBT+ youth. The School Climate Survey found that 73% of LGBT+ students feel unsafe at school, and almost half (48%) had heard homophobic remarks from school staff (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To, 2019).


At primary level, the INTO survey (2020) showed that only 11% of teachers had books with LGBT+ characters in their classrooms, and only 14% had explored LGBT+ identities with their class. One third (33%) of teachers said they felt inhibited by their school patronage or management, and 5% had been explicitly told not to include LGBT+ issues in their teaching. LGBT+ families have also been found to be absent from class textbooks (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018).

The cisheteronormativity² of the classroom is exemplified by the fact that discussions of LGBT+ relationships are considered by some as 'inappropriate' for young children, while fairytales with opposite-sex relationships are commonplace. Neary and Cross (2018) found that school communities were often comfortable dealing with transphobic bullying but much more uncertain educating about gender identity. They found that any progressive change with regard to trans inclusion in schools was highly individualised and did not result in questioning the institutional workings of gender norms that are restrictive for all children.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has led to the development of materials for a Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)/RSE toolkit (NCCA, 2021). This includes some LGBT+-inclusive resources and references to LGBT+-inclusive practice in the guidance documents. Time will tell whether these have a meaningful impact on the lived experience of LGBT+ pupils in our schools.

Action Points

- Schools should have openly LGBT+-supportive educators, ensure they are teaching an LGBT+-inclusive curriculum, institute LGBT+-inclusive policies, and consistently challenge homophobic remarks. This has been shown to create a safer and more inclusive school climate (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020).

 **The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has led to the development of materials for a Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)/RSE toolkit (NCCA, 2021).**

- Teachers should proactively include positive messaging about being LGBT+. This makes all pupils feel safer in school, whether or not they are LGBT+ (Milsom, 2021).
- Any new curriculum must include explicit LGBT+-inclusive objectives. The current curriculum has lots of opportunities for teachers to include positive LGBT+ messaging – for example, including same-sex families in SPHE; reading books with LGBT+ characters; studying LGBT+-related history; learning about the LGBT+ identity of famous people in history, writers, artists, scientists, musicians, and so on. Teachers are often reluctant to do so because it is not explicit in the objectives.

Conclusion

Much progress has undoubtedly been achieved for LGBT+ people in Ireland in recent times. However, this does not automatically translate into better experiences at school for LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families without thoughtful and targeted action from decision-makers in the field.

Given the impending introduction of a new curriculum and the attendant transformation of learning in our primary schools, we have a timely opportunity to interrogate the cisheteronormativity that has hitherto dominated our classrooms and to create a better, more inclusive system for the generations to come.

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ENDNOTES

1. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality, or the assumption that all people encountered are heterosexual.
2. Cisheteronormativity, mentioned later in the article, extends this idea to encompass gender identity. Cisgender is where one's gender identity corresponds with the sex that one was assigned at birth; transgender is where it doesn't. Cisnormativity, then, is the belief that being cisgender is the only normal and natural form of gender identity, or the assumption that all people encountered are cisgender. Cisheteronormativity refers to the assumption that people encountered are both heterosexual and cisgender.

Loneliness - a key public health challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the need for a public health approach to tackle loneliness and social isolation.

This was the message from experts attending an all-island webinar focused on the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness organised by the Institute of Public Health in February 2021.

Over 1,000 people involved in public health, community services and research on the island of Ireland – North and South – joined in the event.

Prof Roger O'Sullivan, Institute of Public Health, said that taking a public health approach could help tackle the root causes of loneliness.

"Our understanding and approach to loneliness is often stereotypical. The reality is that some people with lots of friends can still feel lonely and those who live alone may not.

"Early evidence shows that younger people are disproportionately impacted by loneliness during the pandemic. "Although loneliness is a very personal experience, addressing loneliness is not simply a matter for individuals but is also an issue for public health and society as a whole.

"During this pandemic, a lot more people have gained personal insight into what it means to be lonely. There is now a real opportunity to build on the greater understanding, empathy and concern that have been shown towards those experiencing loneliness and to put in place policies and structures to tackle the root causes and to help support healthy choices.

"We need to take loneliness seriously and recognise it impacts on both physical and mental health," Prof O'Sullivan said.

Some steps that may help:

- Connect with others - spend time building and developing your connections, reach out.
- Be active –walk, cycle, garden –find something you enjoy and that works for you.
- Take notice – take notice of how you are feeling and your environment - when you feel lonely - listen and take action.
- Keep learning - try something new: learn a language, learn to paint, learn to dance.
- Give - do something nice for others e.g. volunteer - it may help you and may help others more.

Becoming a Teacher in a Pandemic

Four student teachers on training during the Covid-19 pandemic



Jade Kelly
Froebel College of Education



Ellen Corr
Dublin City University (DCU)



Tierna Maguire
Marino Institute of Education



Oisín Ryan
Mary Immaculate College (MIC)

We invited students from four undergraduate initial teacher education programmes in Ireland to recount their experiences of what it was like to be a student teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here they describe the challenges, practicalities, unexpected benefits, and hopes for the future.

Ellen Corr, Dublin City University (DCU)

As a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Education in DCU, I appreciate that our year group are in the unique position of having been trained both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading us to have classroom and theory training for teaching in a broad range of conditions! However, becoming a teacher during a pandemic has had its challenges.

Online learning

Like most college students, we spent the last year and a half learning online. Students from my year group never got to return to campus since the first closure in March 2020. The Bachelor of Education course is usually very hands-on and interactive. We would spend most of our time in large classrooms in groups of 20–30 using a range of teaching and learning resources, and we would regularly go off-campus or into the college grounds as part of our seminars.

This is something that I really missed when we were learning online, and it was a lot harder to fully comprehend how to use resources or to structure lessons without being able to experience it first-hand. Our course is also notoriously busy and full-on, and students lean on each other a lot for support during assignment and exam season. I found online learning much more stressful and isolating than previous years, and as a class representative I have heard of many other students who also found it extremely challenging and stressful.

School placement

My year group were extremely fortunate that our school placements weren't majorly affected by the lockdowns. We did first-year, second-year, and third-year placement unaffected, and we still got to do two in-person placements in our final year too. I feel it was important for us to complete school placement and to be in a school environment under the Covid-19 regulations and precautions, as it prepared us for teaching in

those conditions next year. I am very grateful that we did get to go out to schools this year, as I feel that my experiences on placement this year really helped shape me as a teacher.

Missed opportunities

Many of us missed out on opportunities to work with children from local primary schools through our specialism classes. My drama specialism group had spent four weeks preparing to do a series of lessons and workshops with local infant classes, and we never got to carry out those workshops. Opportunities such as these would definitely have increased our skill set in these areas even more, and the online equivalents just didn't exist.

“ In some ways I feel lucky that I qualified during the pandemic, as we were taught about teaching online and how to use online learning platforms, which is something that many current teachers never had.

Benefits

However, it's not all bad! As our online learning was a mixture of synchronous (live) and asynchronous lectures, we had a lot more control over when and how we did our work. This meant that students could fit college work around other commitments, which was especially useful for students who were caring for family members or working. Another big advantage of pre-recorded lectures was that you could rewind or rewatch them if you missed anything or wanted to go over something.

Learning online also saved many commuting students a lot of time and money, and lots of other students didn't have to move to Dublin and pay rent for the year. In some ways I feel lucky that I qualified during the pandemic, as we were taught about teaching online and how to use online learning platforms, which is something that many current teachers never had.

Our teacher training experience definitely wasn't what any of us had imagined, but I am glad that I have graduated feeling prepared to teach under any conditions – in the classroom, online, outside, pre-Covid-19, during Covid-19, and, hopefully soon, post-Covid-19!

Jade Kelly, Froebel College of Education

This past year has allowed for a lot of reflection. In particular, I have reflected deeply on the four wonderful years I have spent at the Froebel Department in Maynooth, completing my teacher education. After three years of learning about Froebel's main principles through active methodologies, we had to transition to online learning six weeks into our final year due to Covid-19.

We returned to our computer screens, tuning in from all over the country. Gone were the days of expensive coffee-drinking and socialising! From the very first day of online learning, it was clear that the lecturers did their utmost to ensure that lectures were both interesting and engaging. Several opportunities for reflection and discussion were offered, which is crucial for a Froebelian teacher.

In early January 2021, the remainder of our final placement was transferred online due to the pandemic. At first, teaching online felt like running a marathon. There was a finish line, but I did not know how far I had to run. I

was tired, but I knew it would be worth it. It was a whole new experience. As Froebelian teachers, we did what we did best. We adapted. We were flexible. With outstanding support from the department, our schools, supervisors, and fellow classmates, we crossed the finish line together.

Like every other placement, this one required me to be innovative, creative, and flexible, but with a heavier focus on information and communications technology (ICT). It was challenging at times, to plan a variety of ways to engage students who were absent from the classroom but present through a computer screen.

This September, I entered the profession with a whole new perspective on teaching. Covid-19 has exposed weaknesses in the education system, but it has also revealed to me what is at the very core of being a teacher: relationships, another key value of Froebel. It is in our nature, just as much as it is in our job description, to be there for our students when they need us.

This was more challenging to navigate as a student teacher, teaching online with little information about the children. As a newly qualified teacher, teaching a senior infants class in rural Roscommon, I am committed to forming these positive relationships and ensuring that my class feel safe in their learning environment, in a world full of uncertainty.

It is all a unity; everything is based on unity, strives towards and comes back to unity. (Friedrich Froebel, in Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings, by Irene M. Lilley, Cambridge University Press, 1967)

Consequently, there are many factors that need to be considered in our first year of teaching. Everything takes a little longer. This includes more time for sanitisation and to get to know staff due to staggered break times and staff bubbles. However, due to Covid-19 guidelines, I continue to uphold one of Froebel's core values excellently, by using the outdoor environment to learn. My class are thoroughly enjoying all the singing, exploring, and playing outside at every opportunity, and as a result, learning.

As our final year of college came to an end in mid-September with our virtual graduation, it was unfortunate we could not cross the finish line of our Bachelor of Education degree together on campus. But we were fortunate to spend three incredible years and the beginning of fourth year on campus. For the foreseeable future, we will continue to smile behind our masks, to sanitise, to social-distance, and to adapt in an ever-changing world.

Tierna Maguire, Marino Institute of Education

I wasn't fazed at all when I found out I was moving to online learning. I was actually looking forward to the experience. I felt that this new way of learning would have its perks: I wouldn't be travelling to and from college, I wouldn't have to get up as early in the morning, and I would have more time to complete assignments. I was also looking forward to enjoying home comforts, as my meals would be cooked for me and I wouldn't have to worry about boring, time-consuming tasks like shopping for food. I honestly felt

I would be much more productive in my learning, because it was the only thing that I would need to focus on.

It wasn't long until I realised that what I had anticipated was far from the reality of online learning. I found myself relying on Zoom, which I had little or no previous experience of using. Early-morning lectures were fine, but as the day progressed I found it really difficult to stay focused. Because I live with quite a few people, I logged into lectures and did assignments mostly in my bedroom – a mistake, because this room is for sleeping, chilling, and generally being lazy.

By the end of the day, my attention span would drop to almost zero, and I found myself daydreaming in some lectures. Yes, I did have more time for doing assignments, but completing them seemed to get more and more difficult as the weeks progressed. At the end of a long day sitting staring at a computer screen, I found I was physically and, more importantly, mentally exhausted, with zero motivation to do more academic work. I found starting assignments really difficult, because there was always something else I just 'had to do'. My bedroom became tidier than I have ever seen it before.

Tiredness, lack of motivation, and procrastination were just the tip of the iceberg when it came to making time for college work. In college, there are lecturers, other students, tables, chairs, a library, classrooms, and most importantly an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Moving home for online learning meant living on a busy farm. A day rarely went by that I wasn't called upon to block a gap, fill doses for cattle, or help with one of the many everyday jobs of a farmer.

Away from the farm, with college moving online, my role as education officer on the Students' Union changed quite significantly. Aspects of that role had to be adapted to meet the needs of the new virtual reality. I found that I needed to rely on Zoom and email communication a lot. Although I had lots of experience of using email, I found it was difficult to keep on top of things because I was getting so many emails.

I did however find that as I got more used to online learning, it got a lot easier. I became used to Zoom, and I used it to keep in virtual contact with my friends, and we supported each other throughout. Also, my college, Marino, is quite small compared to places like Trinity College and DCU. Because the college is small, I know every student in my year and, equally important, all of my lecturers know me. This might seem insignificant, but without the help of the college community, students, and lecturers, online learning would have been much more difficult for me. I knew that if I was really struggling, there would be someone at the other end of a phone, whether it was a student or a lecturer, who would help me overcome whatever obstacles were in my way.

Oisín Ryan, Mary Immaculate College (MIC)

I was delighted to be invited to share my experience of becoming a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic. Believing that school placement is at the centre of initial teacher education, I would like to focus on my school placement experience in autumn 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic.

I was teaching senior infants for both my strand work engagements and the teaching block, in order to ensure that I only interacted with one bubble during the placement. This was a fantastic experience, as it allowed me to develop a fantastic relationship with the children over the course of the placement. I also got the opportunity to work with one of my ex-primary teachers in my old school during the strand weeks, and it was an amazing experience to observe such a super teacher, who left during the mid-term to start a new adventure as principal of a nearby school.

Due to this, I got the opportunity to work with a new teacher during the teaching block, which was another great experience. I helped her settle into her new job, which she was very thankful for. Thankfully, neither my school nor I was affected by Covid-19 during the placement, which allowed me to develop my learning experience to the maximum. Because of Covid-19, we could not have in-class visits from tutors. Instead, we engaged in ongoing discussions with our tutor over Microsoft Teams. Tutors communicated via telephone with both my teachers and my principal on several occasions.

I thoroughly enjoyed the teaching and learning experience that I engaged in over the placement. I also improved my teaching in the areas of assessment and differentiation, which my tutor complimented me on. I enjoyed engaging with Physical Education (PE) as my specialism area, as it allowed me to unite theory and practice and promote meaningful PE for children. The school staff complimented me on my work ethic and wished me the very best for the future. I am really looking forward to using this experience to progress in my teaching and learning journey in the future.

While I could never have imagined, when I started my initial teacher education journey at MIC in 2017, that I would be completing it as the world experienced a global pandemic, doing so has enabled me to explore and discover so much about myself as a newly qualified teacher. Traditionally, there is huge pressure surrounding grades during final-year placement. But this pressure was removed for us.

Although I personally would have liked a grade, I feel there are many positive aspects of criterion-based assessment. This style of assessment allowed me to take a step back and work on each of the areas for assessment, which included teaching and learning strategies, planning and preparation, classroom management, assessment and differentiation, and reflective practice. I felt less overall pressure, which enabled me to put effort into developing in these areas. The scale from *ar fheabhas* to *mishásúil* was also a great addition, as it allowed me to be recognised for my hard work in the criterion areas. The commitment to student voice at MIC was an immense support to me on my journey, as I always felt that my views mattered and were listened to.

As we are all learning to live in a post-Covid-19 world, it is important that initial teacher education programmes in the future learn from the experiences of becoming a teacher during Covid-19, as we have learned much that will help make us all better teachers and create the best learning opportunities we can for children.

Life in and out of lockdowns was a huge challenge for children, not only educationally and socially but in how they thought about their lives and society. This article offers one perspective from a primary school pupil on the hopes and fears felt and the practical and psychological adjustments made during the pandemic.

In the summer of 2020, when we were told that the schools were to reopen, this was followed by joy among students, teachers, and parents alike. By now, people are more familiar with Covid-19, but there are many things that are unclear and still need to be discovered. Scientists are constantly finding variants of the disease that can affect people differently, causing more concerns and doubts around the world.

For the first lockdown, remote learning was implemented, but the return to school for the year 2020–2021 brought many other changes in the way we interact with other students. Washing our hands was mandatory, keeping distance from each other and from other classes was introduced, and a new rule that was applied inside each class consisted of sitting within pods.

The reopening of schools was seen as a light of hope and the start of a new normality. The restrictions were slowly starting to be lifted. But this soon changed, unfortunately, and even if people were looking forward to Christmas, we knew that everything was about to change after the holidays. Case numbers went higher and higher, and suddenly it was the beginning of a second lockdown. The schools closed once again.

We were expecting new restrictions but not a second lockdown. With the changes to education made in the first lockdown, we were all prepared for the situation, and this made learning easier. We were able to continue using Seesaw and other platforms, and we kept in touch with each other regularly.

What I enjoyed about remote learning was that I could do my work on my own time, and it also gave me the opportunity to improve my writing skills. What I didn't enjoy was not being able to share my opinions in class or to see my classmates and teacher. I never believed I would miss school.

Coming Out of Covid-19

A student's voice



Giulia De Marzio
Fifth Class Student,
St Paul's SNS, Ayrfield,
Dublin 13

“ The loss, sickness, and pain that we all felt as a community is unforgettable.”

The restrictions were brought back, and this caused many businesses to close forever. This time, they could not survive another lockdown. This was devastating for the many people who lost their jobs. Meanwhile, the government decided to gradually lift the restrictions for schools yet again.

Eventually, in April, we were back in school with the same restrictions. We were all happy to be back, but we took more precautions to avoid the same mistakes as before. At the same time, we had the news of the first vaccine.

The news of the vaccine led to a whole new perspective of the pandemic; it brought many concerns but at the same time relief around the world. Even if many people were afraid of the vaccine, many others were and still are eager to get protected, because as a society it is our responsibility to be immunised and to win the fight against Covid-19. Scientists are continuing to research for new vaccines and to improve the ones already developed, and this gives optimism for a new beginning.

Many people say that it is the end of the coronavirus. I don't think it's 'the end' of Covid-19 but the beginning of a new time after Covid-19. Your life will never go back to how it was before the pandemic; it will never be the same again. There will always be Covid-19 and all the traumatic events it brought with it. You will always have the memory of the pandemic and the gifts you never knew you had that you found during it.

This experience has taught me to appreciate the smaller things in life and how time is precious. I learned how to live together with Covid-19, but at the same time it took away my time to spend with my loved ones abroad. Covid-19 is and will always be memorable to everyone that has gone through it. The loss, sickness, and pain that we all felt as a community is unforgettable, yet here we are, still hoping for the end of Covid-19.

ONE MILLION TREES SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

Schoolgirls Amber Heneghan, Nicole Connolly and Sienna Heneghan from Maynooth were at the site of Ireland's oldest tree – at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth – for the launch of the schools campaign to plant one million trees in Ireland and Africa to combat climate change.

The Self Help Africa campaign is supported by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and by the Gaelic Players Association (GPA).

Schools can join in by visiting: selfhelpafrica.org/onemilliontrees/schools



The conditions required for sustainable changes in the education system have been considered in education literature and were broadly in place from the onset of the pandemic. Some long-sought resourcing improvements were secured, and the challenge in the post-pandemic period is to embed these as essential features of system supports.

Introduction

This article considers how the school system adapted to meet the unprecedented challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the likely extent to which changes made will endure. I assess recent events over a longer time frame, having worked in education since the mid-1970s, including my final 19 years of employment with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). This analysis is focussed mainly on the primary education sector, based on my personal and professional experience.

Change through a longer lens

When I began teaching in July 1976, the 'new' primary curriculum of 1971 was still fresh and schools were adopting more active learning approaches. The layout of newer schools was changing to accommodate greater variety in teaching practice, for example in the 'shared areas' where two teachers cooperated in working with their classes.

But in many respects, older approaches prevailed. Class sizes were huge, pay scales favoured married men, and corporal punishment remained in place. School management was dominated by religious interests in denominational schools.

Over the 45 years since, all of these aspects and more have changed utterly, generally for the better. Class sizes remain too big but are much reduced, active learning approaches are well embedded, inclusion of children with special needs is progressing, and there is greater school diversity. The INTO has played a significant role in each of these developments.

System change – necessary conditions

Before the pandemic, the education system was under pressure for different reasons. The severe economic recession in the decade from 2008 was enormously challenging. A number of recession-related cuts were 'emergency' measures whose

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Education System Change

Reflections on education change and the pandemic's influence on it



Noel Ward
Former Deputy General
Secretary of INTO

longevity and impact are not yet fully clear. So where does one look for guidance on how more embedded changes come about?

In 1999, I jointly edited a book reflecting on the likely development of education in the 21st century (Ward & Dooney (eds.), 1999). A number of contributors raised questions about the system's capacity to change. Among these, Taoiseach Micheál Martin (then Minister for Education) focussed on how to foster a learning society. He concluded that only by working 'collaboratively and systematically' would Ireland harness the technological revolution's potential to build a learning society for all (ibid., p. 230).

The importance of receptiveness to change and of collective endeavour was highlighted by some of our most distinguished educationalists, who in 2017 identified 'necessary advances' in the system (Coolahan et al., 2017). The conditions required to bring about their recommended reforms included high-quality policy development, good communication, a sense of ownership among practitioners, and supports including resourcing (ibid., p. 183). These are useful benchmarks against which to consider pandemic-related changes.

Separately, John Coolahan argued that the extent and quality of Ireland's education reforms, including the collaborative process around these, have been underestimated (Coolahan, 2017). Recurring themes in discussions about necessary conditions to bring about enduring change in education include preparedness and goodwill, collaboration, communication, and supports.

Pandemic-related changes reviewed

How does one assess the impact and sustainability of system changes prompted by the pandemic from March 2020?

Considerations of preparedness and goodwill were overtaken by necessity. Historian John Dorney has described the key period of constitutional change in Ireland – 1912 to 1923 – as 'a speeding up of history' (Dorney, 2014, p. 10). Similarly, the pandemic period accelerated and necessitated some long-sought reforms, not unlike the nature of the sudden, if overdue, announcement in 1966 of free post-primary education (Walsh, 2009, pp. 185–190).

Pandemic-period collaboration and communication, while not always ideal, were clear features. An early stumble occurred when the Department of Education issued remote-learning guidance without consultation. But unilateral actions were the exception. From personal experience, I know that INTO General Secretary John Boyle was in contact practically daily (and sometimes hourly) with Department officials as the situation developed, and that he and some other partners secured more formal weekly meetings (usually online), which later included public health experts as required.

From late March to August 2020, for example, there were 24 formal INTO meetings with the Department, and several documents on return-to-school supports were agreed. And the INTO's elected executive committee was on call throughout.

Assessing the adequacy of supports will bring us into more contested territory. The education system, including each of its constituent parts, had no road map to navigate a pandemic. School closures, unprecedented in their duration, were required from early March 2020 for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, and again from the Christmas holiday 2020 until March 2021.

Pandemic First Wave

The challenge, from March 2020, of supporting home learning was a huge one for teachers and schools. Whether longer-term lessons may be learned here – in areas such as IT hardware availability and support, broadband capacity, professional readiness, and parental/guardians' capacity to assist – is a question for further debate. More broadly, and of daily relevance, the resourcing challenges highlighted by Covid-19 suggest that certain changes need to be enduring.

The first Covid-19 'wave' covered the initial period of school closures, up to the end of August 2020. The conditions for schools' reopening at the start of the 2020–21 academic year were negotiated throughout that time. Funding, class size, supports for school principals, accommodations for medically vulnerable staff, and cover for absences were among the issues that came into sharp focus. It was immediately clear that a funding package was required: for additional school cleaning, health and safety equipment, and facilities for handwashing and sanitising.

On class size it was striking that, uniquely among our EU neighbours, there was a necessity in Ireland to plan for distancing and pupil pods in classrooms with more than 30 children. Teachers and other education staff in the 'very high risk' category were exempted from attendance at school, and the INTO secured a review mechanism to reassess risk categorisation for the 2020–21 school year.

For school principals with full teaching responsibilities, it became clear that the longstanding demand for one day per week to carry out leadership and management duties had to be granted.

Teacher absences could no longer result in the division of children among other classes in the school, given the risk of virus transmission. As a result, several leave categories were reclassified as requiring substitute cover, and 115 substitute teacher supply panels were established. Similarly, but separately, over 200 clusters, serving 1,075 schools with teaching principals, were established with fixed-term teachers to provide class teaching on the additional leadership and management days.

From an INTO standpoint, every issue which had been prioritised for attention had at the least been progressed prior to schools' reopening in autumn 2020. Of course, not everything in the garden was rosy. Fast-tracked testing and tracing was not in place, a helpline for schools was needed, and a public information campaign to support schools in minimising risk was seen as inadequate.

Pandemic Second Wave

Notwithstanding ongoing concerns, schools reopened and face-to-face teaching resumed in the more restricted and challenging context of the second Covid-19 wave in autumn 2020. Pressure exerted during this period resulted in further developments, including school support teams in HSE areas, weekly reports on testing and tracing in schools, and a dedicated phone line for principals in all HSE areas.

Pandemic Third Wave

The third wave, and the most severe – from late November 2020 to March 2021 – gave rise to particular public health concerns which inexorably impacted education.

The period before the scheduled reopening of schools in January 2021 was one of great anxiety among staff, reflecting significant growth in Covid-19 infections nationally. This fraught time saw confrontation alongside collaboration as education workers' representatives argued with the State authorities about the safety of reopening as case numbers spiked upwards.

Moving its position on school reopening dates a number of times, the Department abandoned a published plan to reopen on 21 January. Ultimately, all primary and special schools were open no later than 15 March 2021. With enhanced supports, including flexible arrangements for vulnerable staff and additional risk mitigation measures, the schools stayed open for the remainder of the school year.

Pandemic Fourth Wave

At the time of writing (September 2021), the Delta variant of Covid-19 predominates, but the well-advanced vaccination programme is mitigating the severity of the wave. With education facilities at all levels open from the start of the 2021–22 academic year, the HSE's response to school outbreaks and the operation of 'close contact' protocols have come into focus.

Lessons to learn

What can we learn from the pandemic experience about the capacity of the system to change, the characteristics of that change, and the degree of collaboration that facilitated the agility of adaptation?

The focus here is on education-related measures; assessing health-related changes is a separate matter. It was clear that under-resourcing had left the primary and special schools struggling with financial, IT, and staffing challenges. Only after protracted engagement with teacher representatives and other stakeholders was a workable accommodation put in place, with flexibility to recognise particular concerns. The question remains whether reform measures are seen by the Department as temporary, 'crisis' responses.

We learned from the pandemic that schools, teachers, and the education system are more adaptable than might have been envisaged. Covid-19 also

brought the inequalities in our society – as reflected in schools’ capacity to engage with students from challenging backgrounds – into sharp focus.

There are bedrock conditions for a good education system which have been highlighted, established, or restored since March 2020 but which must now be embedded. These include recognising the entitlement of each child to have a qualified teacher every day, that additional supports are critical where significant disadvantage is a factor, that teacher supply must be better organised, that class size really matters, and that the job of teaching principal is impossible without sufficient non-teaching time.

As the system and its staff adapted, some unfortunate interventions threatened the pillars supporting change. There were the brief but remarkable days in January 2021 when, as schools’ reopening was delayed, both Ministers Foley and Madigan reached for blame among staff negotiators. Trust could have been lost and change blocked, but cooler heads prevailed.

And then there was the nature of much social media commentary. In Susan McKay’s important new book, a former Unionist MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) remarks that there would never have been a Good Friday Agreement had social media existed at the time (McKay, 2021, p. 159). In light of some education-related online discourse during the pandemic, a more defined boundary is surely needed between fair commentary and cavalier negativity.

A pandemic dividend for education?

It is not appropriate to end on a negative note given the heroic response of schools and their staffs and management to the pandemic challenges. Perhaps more than ever before, education – and specifically attendance at school – was recognised as an essential service. And a level of resourcing to more closely match this recognition was secured.

There were some changes whose future trajectory will be guided by public health advice. As regards resourcing of education, the task ahead in the much-desired post-Covid-19 society is to retain necessary supports which the pandemic heralded but which its demise cannot be allowed to see stripped away.

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Living in the Shelter, Not the Shadows, of Each Other

It’s time to celebrate Traveller culture and customs in our schools



Damian White

Principal of Scoil Shinchill, Killeigh, Co. Offaly, and Immediate Past President of the Irish Primary Principals’ Network

This article outlines the richness of Traveller culture and why it should be part of the Irish primary school curriculum. It is time to show children that, along with the new and exciting cultures they experience through their new friends from international backgrounds, there is a rich and valuable backstory to a national ethnic group whose story has too long been misunderstood. Doing so will help prevent mistakes from being repeated and will enable tolerance and appreciation to prevail.

In *The Master*, his seminal autobiography on his career as a teacher and school principal, the late and much-celebrated Listowel writer Bryan MacMahon fondly recounts his dealings with the Travelling community, their stories, their lore, their unique Shelta dialect, and their capacity as an ethnic group to survive great hardships with steely resilience and self-reliance.

Travellers’ capacity to overcome great odds, and the genteel Kerry schoolmaster’s scholarly understanding of their customs and ways, led to his invitation at the height of the Cold War to address an academic transatlantic gathering on what they could teach the world about survival after a nuclear attack. Irish Travellers were one of two ethnic groups identified by psychoanalysts of the time as having the innate natural toolkit to survive the unimaginable hardships of a post-apocalyptic reality.

In the 1930s, another noted primary teacher, Patrick Greene – fondly recalled in his native Longford as ‘Master Greene’ – combined his love of storytelling and folklore and the friendship and trust he developed with the many Travellers who seasonally camped on the roadsides in the Granard area, to mine a rich seam of priceless oral history for the Folklore Commission. At the time of his death in 2007, Master Greene was 107 and Ireland’s oldest man. But he had continued to support Traveller children’s education well past his 100th birthday, teaching them Shelta, widely known as the Cant and known to its native speakers in Ireland as De Gammon. His writings for the folklore periodical *Béalóideas* in the 1930s, and his lexicon of Cant words, are among the most significant sources of information on Irish Traveller life.

Bryan MacMahon’s most celebrated play, *The Honey Spike*, allows us to travel with a young pregnant woman and her husband from the travelling community in County Antrim, where she lives, to her favoured ‘Spike’ or birthing hospital

in Kerry, where she herself was born. Through the play we experience the richness of Irish Traveller culture and the highs and lows of life for those born into that nomadic tradition.

Bryan MacMahon and Patrick Greene, through their work as primary teachers and through their natural curiosity and empathy, gave us in their writings a window into the world of travelling people laced with a genuine respect and admiration for a way of life alien to our more formulated mores in the 'settled' community.

Over the past 25 years or so, the demographic in Irish primary schools has changed dramatically. When I became a school principal in 1994, a principal filling the school register rarely had to look beyond *An Sloinnteoir Gaeilge agus an tAinmneoir* (a book of first names and surnames in Irish by Muiris Ó Droighneáin) to log the enrolment of new students under their 'Irish' moniker. Since that time, our schools and communities have been enriched with the arrival of people from all corners of the globe, bringing with them and sharing with us their rich and varied cultures.

Schools have played a huge part in easing the transition of people from other cultures to Irish life, while acknowledging their unique backgrounds and customs. International Day in many schools, particularly those with a wide variety of nationalities among their parent body, allows children to celebrate the uniqueness of their own cultures, traditions, and languages, and to proudly share with their peers details and samples of their foods, clothing, music, and customs. Sadly, such events do not eliminate racism and race-related incidents, but they do help enormously in bringing most people to a greater understanding and appreciation of the lives and lifestyles of their new neighbours.

“ Our schools and communities have been enriched with the arrival of people from all corners of the globe, bringing with them and sharing with us their rich and varied cultures. ”

On 1 March 2017, then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny took the historic step of recognising Traveller ethnicity in Dáil Éireann. In doing so, he acknowledged the role of a 17-year-old named Robbie, who he said had deeply moved him during a representation made to him some weeks previously:

The representatives spoke passionately about how this strong message from the State would be a very important symbolic and positive step in acknowledging the uniqueness of Traveller identity. They felt it would resonate strongly among the community and help counter the stigma and shame felt by many, particularly young people, and increase feelings of respect, self-esteem, and inclusion.

At the time of writing, we are approaching five years since that significant day for the Irish Traveller community. It brought to fruition the tireless and often unheralded work of groups such as Pavee Point, the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Traveller Women's Forum, and Mincéirs Whiden, who have campaigned strongly on behalf of Travellers for decades. They have worked hard with the community to improve living conditions and to promote health and education and access to services. They have sought to empower Travellers and have not been afraid to help them address some of their own internal challenges.

In his speech, the Taoiseach announced the establishment of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS), whose meetings I've had the privilege of attending for a number of years on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals' Network. Reports on the good work being carried out with children, young adults, and parents in the Traveller community in the various areas where they live in significant numbers are indicative of a real interest in improving the lives of people on many fronts.

It is time now to include lessons on Traveller history and customs in our curriculum. It is time to show children today that, along with the new and exciting cultures they experience through their new friends from international backgrounds, there is a rich and valuable backstory to a national ethnic group whose story has too long been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and parodied. It is time to celebrate customs and a language that have existed in our midst but out of our eyeline for generations. Doing so will help prevent mistakes from being repeated and will enable tolerance and appreciation to prevail.

Leaving the last word to the Taoiseach: 'May all the people of our nation live in the shelter and never in the shadow of each other.'



On 1 March 2017, the then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny took the historic step of recognising Traveller ethnicity in Dáil Éireann.

This followed a representation by Travellers which had deeply moved the then-Taoiseach, at which they spoke passionately about how this strong message from the State would be a very important symbolic and positive step in acknowledging the uniqueness of Traveller identity.

Readings from The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by members of the Traveller Community, Mayo

VIDEO created by Breda Mayock for Mayo Traveller Support Group, for Culture Night 2021.

Coordinator: Louise Ward

Music: Breda Mayock

Speakers: Jessica McDonagh, Amy McDonagh, Bethany Ward, Andrea Ward, Joshua Maughan, Connor Allen & Eddie Allen

Watch the Video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rq1H7GltS>

A PERSON



Breda Mayock - Artist and Musician

Culture Night in Castlebar

by Breda Mayock

The theme of Castlebar Culture Night 2021 was **Inclusion, Diversity and Human Rights**. So, we thought that hearing The Declaration of Human Rights from the mouths of young people from the Traveller Community would be a simple but powerful message.

Louise Ward, director of Mayo Traveller Support Group, brought together a number of youths from Ballyhaunis and we filmed *A Person Just Like You*.

When I met with Louise, one of the first conversations we had focused on the future for the Traveller Community.

Louise was convinced that "the young people are our hope".

"I feel that to encourage the younger generation and to move forward, especially with education, to have the courage to step out of comfort zones and to put fear of being judged or failing aside, is key. For our younger generation to have pride in their background, who they are and where they come from, is so very important"

In preparing for Culture Night 2021, I collaborated with Louise on ideas for a video with young people. As we were working, Andrea, one of the young girls, said that she had heard my song 'If Your Heart' and liked it. This inspired me to record a new version of the melody for the video.

The rights quoted by the young people included

- the right to work,
- the right to education,
- the right to travel,
- the right to be part of the government of our country.

The Traveller Community has been denied so many of these rights for such a long time. We in the settled community must fully and urgently realise that the way we treat the people of this valuable and unique Irish ethnic culture must change.

It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences - Audre Lorde

Parents' Voices through the Covid-19 Pandemic

Family wellbeing and home education

Homeschooling, along with remote working, was a defining feature of our lives under Covid-19. This article highlights the family wellbeing and experience of 151 parents with children aged 4-13 years who were interviewed by the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, between March 2020 and September 2021 as part of its Covid-19 supports.

Homeschooling, along with remote working, was a defining feature of our lives under Covid-19. Never in the history of the State did the role of educator fall so directly on parents. For most parents, this was extremely challenging. The Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland, has collaborated with parents on children's education for over 15 years. This article outlines the family wellbeing and experience of parents in the ParentChild+ programme who were contacted as part of ELI's Covid-19 supports.

Between March and June 2020, ELI contacted 120 parents (with children aged 4-13 years), 40 of whom engaged in interviews. This was cohort 1. A further 225 families were contacted over the school year 2020-21, with 84 interviewed (cohort 2). Another 111 families were contacted in July-September 2021, with 27 interviewed (cohort 3).

Family wellbeing

With the pandemic just beginning, the wellbeing of cohort 1 families was lower than that of cohorts 2 and 3. Only 44% (n = 17) of cohort 1 said they were doing well, compared with 63% (n = 53) of cohort 2 and 77% (n = 21) of cohort 3. No one in cohort 3 rated their family's wellbeing as low, compared with 13% (n = 5) of cohort 1 and 11% (n = 9) of cohort 2. Here are some of the parents' comments:

It was really tough during Covid, but all the family are keeping well.

We are doing quite well - we try and go outdoors as much as possible, find this is better for the children.

We are doing fine, but the pandemic has affected everybody in some way. Our child has a great love of reading, and this is down to the Home Visiting programme. We got lots of books from the programme, and we have continued this and kept our child busy.



Dr Josephine Bleach

Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

I feel very stressed, as my son is crying and finding it hard and not confident since and during lockdown. Two months without school has been difficult. We cannot do all the study. He cannot communicate, but improving. Speaking Spanish in crèche so try English completely. Delayed language, as speaking two languages.

I am anxious about whether my youngest child, who is 2 years and 3 months, will get a place in crèche next month. I find it hard to bring the two kids out, as I am by myself. I would like them to get interaction with other children.

It was difficult for Dad in lockdown, looking after 3 children, because I (Mam) was working. The teenager did not want to engage in online learning, and Dad would get frustrated.

We really struggled during the first lockdown. Our child could not understand the concept of homeschooling and found it hard to separate home and school. Child had temper tantrums. We sought advice from a child psychologist. The whole family were very stressed.

We are coping well but had a problem with addiction which only came to light during lockdown.

Prisoners in our own home. Neighbours causing hassle. Left to live with older parents as children scared. Much better now. Children had cabin fever but can play in grandparents' garden.

Found lockdown very hard, as we live in an apartment and the children found it hard for somewhere to play.

There is a fear around drugs, as they are escalating in the area.

We are working from home and enjoying having more family time.

We are doing well because the children are back in school. I found it tough in lockdown.

School closures

Questions on school closures were asked of cohorts 1 and 2. With schools closed from March to June 2020, only 38% (n = 14) of cohort 1 were managing well with their children home from school, compared with 61% (n = 51) of cohort 2.

Satisfaction with their children's schools was similar, with 63% of both cohorts happy with the support received. However, 18% of cohort 1 were dissatisfied, compared with only 7% of cohort 2. Of those that were interviewed after children had returned to school (n = 53), only four said that their children missed much school due to Covid-19.

School is doing check-in phone calls to the family. Schoolwork put up on Zoom.

Also paper copies of work given to family.

The school is fantastic, they gave great support. You could not fault them in any way.

School checked in with families to see how they were coping. Children doing schoolwork on the Seesaw app.

We were comfortable using technology. The school was very helpful to parents, encouraging them to engage with new technologies.

Technology-supported learning in the home because the school provided so many platforms for learning.

Having a lot of devices was helpful for schoolwork and working from home.

School had Zoom class for a half hour 1 day a week, then went up to twice a week. Would have liked more support from school.

Better for son to be in school, better for his English. More school, more homework.

Home learning support

Lockdowns and school closures impacted on parents' perceptions of the quality of the home learning environment that they provided to their children: only 34% of cohort 1 were happy with it, compared with 50% of cohort 2.

This was reflected in the requests for support, with 34% of cohort 1 requesting educational activity packs, compared with 24% of cohort 2. As society and schools opened up, there were more requests for the links to ELI's social media and online group sessions.

Thank you so much for the pack. These packs are amazing. They just have opened the world of arts and crafts to my son. We are just so grateful for them.

My daughter received an activity pack and was delighted that ELI remembered her. It kept her going, and now I use it with smaller children.

It was a very good programme, and my child is continuing what she learnt by having a weekend card game with her cousins, who are 12 and 9. It is great fun for them and a great way of learning. Crazy 8s is now her favourite game.

Activity packs and learning material like counting 1–10 and colours to help with my child's memory. My child is very young, but anything to help her retain knowledge would be great.

I would be interested in an activity pack and a parenting course, as I would love some tips and ideas. It would be a great benefit to me.

Just stuff for kids to do – confined to the home and they were killing one another.

Would like to connect with online groups. Missing library and outdoor activities. Like link to ELI FB [Facebook] page.

Would like info on coding and link to webpage to see what's on offer and make contact if I feel I want.

Getting enough support from the school but would be interested in the Restorative Parenting Programme.

No need for any additional support at this time, but there would be a real need for support if there was another lockdown and the children had to access classes online again.

My child is busy enough with playschool 5 days a week, but I will keep an eye on the Facebook group as I may want to engage again in the future.

I have two kids at home. Please send link to webpage, as most of sessions online. Please email me.

We were delighted to receive the ParentChild+ programme and also the STEM programme over the summer. Would like to be involved in more summer programmes. Both home visitors were fantastic help to the family.

Conclusion

Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures were tough on families. With home learning more critical than ever to children's future success in education, there is a need for more direct parental engagement and home-based programmes to support children's learning.

Over the past year, in collaboration with parents, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) has trialled a variety of differentiated hybrid home-based learning activities. We believe that a blended, flexible, e-learning approach using regular phone or video contact, home learning packs, and access to online learning resources and services is required to support child, parent, and family wellbeing and education.



Sam's Business Bus is a free entrepreneurial programme, aimed at sowing the seeds of entrepreneurship in school children aged ten to twelve and inspiring them to become the entrepreneurs of the future.

Sam's Business Bus is funded by Enterprise Ireland, and is delivered on a national basis by EDelia Group. The programme is written by educators for educators and provides a range of classroom-ready resources for teachers to use as they wish.



Second Level

Top Prize Winner at SciFest National Final

Clare Reidy, sixth year student from Our Lady's Bower School, Athlone, was named SciFest STEM Champion 2021 in November of this year.

Clare received the award for her innovative research project, which explored Cosmic Radiation Protection, investigating effective building materials for future exploration of Mars.

Clare's victory will see her represent Ireland at the Regeneron International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) in Atlanta, Georgia in May 2022.

Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2021



Dr Emer Nowlan
CEO of Educate
Together

This article provides an overview of the second-level education sector in Ireland as the Covid-19 pandemic hampers progress towards important reforms. Touching on major themes that feature in the chapter as a whole, it shows how ongoing inequality and underinvestment in education are intrinsically connected, and it argues that, instead of returning to 'business as usual', we now need to make the investment necessary to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all.

A return to 'business as usual'?

In Ireland's *Education Yearbook 2020*, Taoiseach Micheál Martin highlighted the creation of a dedicated Department of Education focusing exclusively on schools as an opportunity for innovation. He envisaged 2021 as a year beyond Covid-19, when important initiatives to develop our education system could be commenced or continued, and highlighted the Leaving Certificate as a key area for reform.

One year on, Covid-19 remains a central focus for all of us, deeply affecting our lives, our work, and our schools. Politicians and civil servants remain in crisis mode, as do most of those working in the education sector, limiting capacity for strategic planning and development and hampering progress towards important reforms. Contributions to the present *Yearbook* reflect this ongoing focus.

Eamonn Carroll and Selina McCoy highlight how the pandemic has laid bare the deficiencies in our social structures and services that leave schools bearing the weight of responsibility for combatting educational inequalities. They urge us not to accept the inequities that have now been made visible, but to reimagine our system as we return to 'business as usual'.

Other contributions include potential tools and approaches that might be of benefit as we navigate a course to less stressful and more 'normal' times. We are invited to consider the roles played by the informal education sector, European collaboration, universal design for learning, language learning, and more focus on children's rights and participation, in making our sector more equitable and effective.

Second-level sector in 2021

The profile of our second-level sector continues to develop slowly. Enrolments have risen steadily

in recent years, putting pressure on teacher supply and infrastructure. In 2020 the total number of second-level students reached 380,000, with the largest increases in the counties surrounding Dublin (Department of Education, 2021). Forty-five new post-primary schools have opened since 2013 to cater for population growth, and overall trends are towards more students attending larger, mixed, multi-denominational schools. Nevertheless, the sector in Ireland continues to be an outlier internationally, with a higher proportion of small, single-sex, and denominational schools than other OECD countries.

Alongside growing enrolments have been increases in provision for students with additional needs. There has been a significant rise in the number of dedicated classes for autistic students in second-level schools, for example (NCSE, 2021), but provision still falls short of demand in many areas. In the absence of systematic planning, a disproportionate number of classes open in new and developing schools, leading to an imbalance of provision and many students having to travel long distances.

Falling birth rates since 2020 mean that student numbers at second level are projected to peak in 2024 at around 410,000 (Department of Education, 2020). While new schools will continue to be needed in areas of housing development, enrolments in other areas may fall. This means that the potential to rebalance provision through new schools will reduce, and we will need to explore other ways to meet growing demand for mixed and multi-denominational schools and specialist autism provision. It will hopefully also enable a renewed focus on ensuring that schools that have opened can move into permanent buildings.

“ In the absence of systematic planning, a disproportionate number of classes [for autistic students] open in new and developing schools, leading to an imbalance...

Retention rates continue to be high in international terms: the proportion of young people aged 16–18 not enrolled in education is just 2%, compared to an EU average of 5% (OECD, 2021c). Although gaps in reading ability between the highest and lowest socio-economic groups in Ireland are lower than in many other countries, socio-economic background continues to have the strongest influence on learning outcomes for our young people (OECD, 2021a).

Research by UNICEF shows that young people in our second-level schools rate highly in academic and social skills, but worse in physical health and mental wellbeing. On life satisfaction, children in Ireland rate themselves among the lowest in the OECD/EU, with 28% marking a score of 5 or lower on a scale of 1–10. Issues contributing to these low scores include body image, pressure to succeed in school, bullying, and sense of meaning or purpose in life (UNICEF, 2020).

We continue to lag behind in investment in education: just 3% of our GDP is spent on educational institutions here, compared to an OECD average of 4.5%, with 1.1% going to post-primary (OECD, 2021b). This underinvestment impacts negatively on students, school staff, and communities. While wealthier families and communities can – and do – compensate through fundraising and paying for out-of-school supports, underfunding of our schools impacts most on poor and working-class students and those with

additional needs. Kieran Christie argues in his contribution that this is economically short-sighted as well as socially indefensible.

Covid-19 and socio-economic inequalities

Around the world, Covid-19 has exacerbated existing socio-economic inequalities. The pandemic continues to have a disproportionate negative impact on those with less resources, and the poorest have suffered most in terms of health, employment, and social outcomes. The effects of school closures have also been worse for children and young people from lower socio-economic groups (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2021). Emerging research from across the world has identified specific issues, including lack of space, poor access to technology, and limited family support, that have impeded remote learning for students from poorer families, and there are serious concerns of increased drop-out and early school leaving.

“ The effects of school closures have been worse for children and young people from lower socio-economic groups.

In Ireland, Covid-19 has shone a bright light on deficiencies in our social services and digital infrastructure as well as our education system (Darmody et al., 2021). A shortage of community services means that children and young people with disabilities rely heavily on schools to gain access to social and therapeutic supports, as well as respite for families. The sharp decrease in referrals to Tusla during our relatively long periods of school closure (Clarke, 2020) reminds us of the vital role our schools play in identifying signs of neglect and abuse and protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

The fact that reimagining school lunches became the immediate priority for so many school leaders in DEIS schools when closures were announced reminds us that far too many families in Ireland struggle to meet their children's basic needs without support. All of this prompts us to reflect on the crucial role of schools, not only in ensuring that all students can reach their potential while at school but also in engaging in the broader societal imperative to reduce enduring social, economic, and educational inequalities.

Where to now?

Inequalities arise at national, sectoral, school, classroom, and individual levels. The pandemic has drawn actors at every level into crisis mode, with considerable energy and time necessarily focused on seeking practical solutions in a constantly changing landscape: short-term problem-solving, rather than long-term planning. As we emerge, it is important to step back and take a wider view, bringing together what we have learned in the past 20 months with what we know about how education works, and placing children and young people firmly at the centre of our planning and decision-making. I want to offer two frameworks that might help us to do that.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) calls on us to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. UNESCO research and analysis over a number of years has identified barriers to equity as well as successful approaches towards

achieving this goal. This research points to four key practices that promote equity and inclusion for all:

- Schools and other learning centres have strategies for encouraging the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners from their local community.
- Schools and other learning centres provide support for learners who are at risk of underachievement, marginalisation, and exclusion.
- Teachers and support staff are prepared to respond to learner diversity during their initial training.
- Teachers and support staff have opportunities to take part in continuing professional development (CPD) regarding inclusive and equitable practices. (UNESCO, 2017)

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring report (UNESCO, 2020) charts progress towards SDG4 and makes recommendations based on current challenges. These include targeting investment on those left behind; sharing expertise and resources; empowering and motivating the education workforce; consulting with parents, communities, and NGOs; and applying universal design.

Central to equitable approaches in education is recognising that learners have multiple, intersecting identities and that no one characteristic is associated with any predetermined ability to learn. (UNESCO, 2020)

This may seem obvious, but in a world where neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and individualism dominate, we need to constantly remind ourselves that patterns of underachievement among certain 'groups' of students result from the barriers in our system, not from students themselves.

In considering how we want to develop our sector to become more equitable post-pandemic, SDG4 is a good place to start. Do our schools have specific strategies to encourage the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners from their local community? Patently they don't, since so many children and young people with autism travel long distances to school. So we need to ask what infrastructure, supports, resources, and cultural shifts are required to make this happen.

Are we doing enough through initial and continuing teacher education to support school staff to respond to learner diversity? Unlikely, since so many teachers report a lack of confidence in teaching students with additional needs (Rose et al., 2015) and from minority ethnic backgrounds (Brown et al., 2017). Are we targeting investment to those who are marginalised? The DEIS programme sets out to do this, but reviews have shown considerable shortcomings (Smyth, 2015; Fleming, 2020), and many students with significant needs fall outside the net because they are in the wrong school.

A second framework that can help us think about how to rebalance our system to become more equitable is that devised by Kathleen Lynch and John Baker in their groundbreaking work on equality of condition (Lynch & Baker, 2005). They ask schools to go further than equalising access

“Are we doing enough through initial and continuing teacher education to support school staff to respond to learner diversity?”

“It is crucial that we overhaul the entry system to third level.”

and participation, and to actively analyse and challenge socio-economic inequalities through curriculum, practice, and school culture.

By analysing the unequal distribution of resources, respect, recognition, and relational power within and between our schools, and by taking concrete actions to redistribute these, we can make real differences in young people's lives and in society. In practical terms, taking an equality-of-condition approach means widening curriculum and assessment practices to encompass the full range of human achievements, democratising decision-making, and fostering the emotional development of students and teachers.

Addressing inequalities post-pandemic

We can see some seeds of the types of changes that are needed in initiatives and reforms that had begun pre-Covid-19. There is recognition of the need to move towards a more inclusive system, where students of all abilities have the option to attend their local school. But we need a much more realistic view of the supports that are required, and we need a clear strategy and roadmap of how to get there. Similarly, there are government targets to improve access to multi-denominational and equality-based schools, but a plan is needed to effect this change.

It is vital that we take full advantage of the opportunity presented by the current review of senior cycle to broaden both the learning we assess and the way we assess it. It is also crucial that we overhaul the entry system to third level. The increased focus on wellbeing in schools is welcome, but increased curriculum time must be accompanied by support for CPD in trauma-informed and nurturing approaches, as well as access to professional counsellors and therapists and improvements in wider social services.

There are opportunities also with the implementation of Languages Connect to make our schools more supportive of multilingualism, and this must be accompanied by increased support for high-quality English as an Additional Language provision.

All of this is important, and none of it can be achieved without investment. As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, countries across Europe are investing in education to address learning loss and achievement gaps. In our smaller neighbour Wales, GBP 150 million has been announced so far, and in England the figure is approaching £5 billion.

In Ireland, where the need for recovery is arguably greater, because of chronic underfunding and longer school closures, just €100 million has been announced. This includes €50 million for additional 'CLASS' teaching hours, which are for all schools rather than targeting the greatest need, and which many schools will be unable to avail of because of the ongoing teacher shortage.

Investment is key

It is likely that reading back through Education Matters' Yearbook archives since 1987, we would find in every issue at least one article referring to

educational inequality, and one referring to underinvestment in education. These are not unconnected. For too long we have papered over the cracks in our system with voluntary initiative and fundraising, to the detriment of students with the greatest needs. The title of the Taoiseach's article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020* was 'Vision of Ireland's Future through Investment in Education'. As we emerge from the pandemic, instead of returning to 'business as usual', let's seek the investment that is required to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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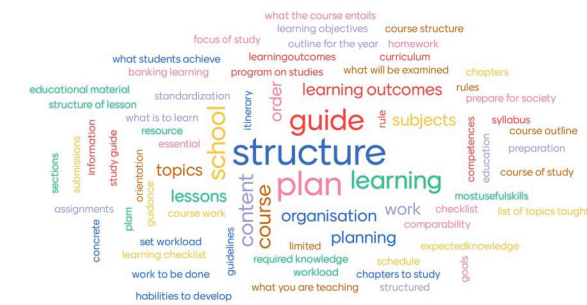
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Curriculum as an Encounter

This article traces the curriculum conversations of the last three decades and the development of subject specifications in Ireland. It shows how policy in the form of written curriculum is responding to the need for more learner-centred teaching, and giving teachers the space to be professionals in curriculum-making.

Introduction

When I teach my curriculum studies module with pre-service teachers, I usually begin by asking them to define 'curriculum'. They come up with many definitions, most of which are centred on the concept of subjects, topics, courses – in other words, curriculum as a script, a written document – see Figure 1. But curriculum is more than this. The word comes from Latin *curriculum* 'course', from *currere* 'run'; so curriculum 'is experienced and enacted' (Pinar, 2015, p. 11).



Word cloud representing student responses in September 2021 to the question, What is meant by the term 'curriculum'?

There are multiple actors involved in curriculum enactment. The primary encounters happen between teachers and their students and other teachers. Other encounters also occur, such as between school leaders and teachers, parents and students, policymakers and teachers, professional development providers, and so on.

Curriculum is made in multiple sites: at the policy table, in the school, and at classroom and individual levels, among others; it is political and involves power (Priestley et al., 2021). The written curriculum text is just one part of this picture. How this document supports and enables teachers to make curriculum in their classes is the topic of this short piece.



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Curriculum specification in Ireland

In recent years there has been some critique of how we present our written curriculum in Ireland (Hyland, 2014). This is predicated, in my opinion, on a historical dependence on 'scripted curriculum' with an emphasis on clearly specified content (Gleeson, 2021, p. 15). In 1991 the OECD was critical of the traditional pedagogical style in Irish education and called for more student-centred approaches to be adopted (OECD, 1991, p. 74). This move away from didactic, transmission-style teaching led to more focus being put on the development of skills (NCCA, 2004).

Since Lisbon in 2000 (European Council, 2000) and the subsequent European Framework of Key Competences (European Commission, 2007, revised in 2017), there has been a move in Ireland and elsewhere towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development, with learning being defined in terms of what students should be able to know and do at the end of a course. Learning outcomes were first used in the rebalanced Junior Certificate subject syllabi in the early 2000s (NCCA, 2019). This, coupled with the inclusion of key skills in specifications, seeks to move students from being passive receivers and consumers of knowledge to being agile, creative, and innovative and taking on a more critical and engaged role in learning.

For example, learning in specifications is linked to overall skills development and guiding principles in the Framework for Junior Cycle, which is different from how subjects were described in individual syllabi in the past. Shifts such as this can be very challenging, especially for teachers who have been deemed to be 'successful' with previous approaches. The need for all actors to appreciate the rationale for the changes is vital.

It is important to set the context for this discussion on specifications, which is too often narrowed to comparative analysis of the technical form of the curriculum specification, to previous syllabi, or to examples from other jurisdictions. This conveniently underplays the complexities of curriculum in the context of the prevailing national policy imperatives and the dynamic nature of curriculum as a process and not a product.

In essence, in Ireland since 2000 we had three parallel message systems: that our teaching needed to be more learner-centred (Smyth & McCoy, 2011), that competence or skill development needed to be embedded in learning (NCCA, 2004, 2005), and that teachers were to be given more scope in curriculum planning (NCCA, 2015). To this end, the current specification structure, promoted by public policy in Ireland (DES, 2011), has been described as a learner-centred, constructivist-influenced curriculum (Gleeson et al., 2020).

This move to focusing the curriculum on the students' experience puts more emphasis on how teachers plan for enactment and how they make pedagogical decisions. To do this kind of curriculum-making, teachers need to develop curriculum thinking (Deng, 2020), to develop the capacity to be curriculum makers (Deng, 2020; Priestley et al., 2021), and to be given the agency to negotiate spaces within sites for curriculum making (Priestley et al., 2015, 2021). Professional judgement is an essential part of this, of the kind

“ There has been a move in Ireland towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum development, with learning being defined in terms of what students should be able to know and do at the end of a course.

“ Key skills move away from rote learning to emphasise the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, self- and peer assessment, agency, and skills for living rich lives.

that we witnessed in the move to distance learning during the pandemic (Dempsey & Burke, 2021).

To facilitate this move to providing more curriculum-making space, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) moved to developing curriculum specifications that allowed scope for local interpretation in learning outcomes, not unlike what we have had in Transition Year since 1993 (Department of Education, 1993). This curriculum space aimed to give teachers more agency in making pedagogical decisions. The important word in every learning outcome is the action verb, as this indicates the pedagogical decisions the teacher can make, the learning experience the student will have, and how the learning will be assessed.

Underpinning their importance, all subject specifications contain a glossary of these action verbs. For example, if the learning outcome begins with the word 'explain', this means 'give a detailed account, including reasons and causes' (DES, 2015, p. 25). Teachers must think about how they can set up a learning opportunity for their students that will allow them the space to learn about a topic in sufficient depth to be able to give a detailed account that includes reasons and causes. Teachers must also think about how they will assess this learning and the various potential purposes for assessment.

All of this is completed in reference to content knowledge of the discipline. To some, this may seem prescriptive in itself, but to others there is a call for 'depth of treatment' for learning outcomes. This concept is problematic, as it is not to be found in other jurisdictions and is, in my opinion, linked to an overemphasis on assessment. Research has consistently linked specificity in syllabus documentation to the predictability of terminal assessments, and to excessive focus on those assessments to the detriment of educational experience (Baird et al., 2016). This conflicts with the essential purpose of assessment and reporting at Junior Cycle, which is to support learning (DES, 2015, p. 21).

The role of key skills is an important point that is often overlooked when the focus is on content and its relationship with summative assessment. At the same time, very few will challenge the value and importance of students developing these skills during their time in school. The student-centred nature of learning outcomes allows for the flexibility in approaches to teaching and learning to support the development of these key skills. Key skills embedded in all specifications move away from rote learning to emphasise the development of, for example, critical thinking, problem-solving, self- and peer assessment, agency, and skills for living rich lives in a world threatened by extinction.

Conclusion

In the classroom, curriculum and teaching 'become inextricably merged and integrated'; to understand one, you must understand the other (Deng, 2017, p. 13). However, this is only part of the story, as both are part of a

larger system that includes accountability structures, assessment regimes, university and further education routes, teacher professional structures, government funding, and so on. All of these impact on how curriculum is enacted.

The specification and its enactment are a significant part of the curriculum story, but they can only have the impact envisaged if other structures support and work alongside this process. While acknowledging the challenges involved in writing learning outcomes, the complexity for teachers of working with them, and the need to have clarity on their assessment, the specifications in Ireland are responding to the need for more learner-centred teaching and are giving teachers space to be professionals in curriculum making.

The curriculum must be fit for purpose, but there is no single fit-for-all solution. The three decades of curriculum conversations have helped us develop a richer understanding of this school space, described by Priestley (2019, p. 8) as 'the multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated'. This concept of curriculum as an encounter challenges us to identify how all stakeholders can work together to ensure that the enacted curriculum reflects the intended curriculum.

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Demand for urgent action on Climate Change



The 'Fridays for Future' school strike, demanding urgent action on Climate Change, took place outside the Department of An Taoiseach, Merrion Square, Dublin in September 2021.

Pictured here are members of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU), from left:

Denis, ISSU Welfare Officer;

Shari, newly elected Regional Officer for Dublin Fingal;

Racheal, from the ISSU's Pool of Trainers;

Courtney, Regional Officer for the Laois-Offaly region.

This article discusses the nature of partnership in the formulation of national curriculum policy. The question of student voice shows the limitations of a purely representative interpretation of democracy. Curriculum policy formulation should strive for participatory democracy to allow the authentic voice of students to be heard in every classroom. The recent experience of the NCCA Development Group for Leaving Certificate Art provides an empirical source of reference for consideration.

The concept of partnership is well established in Irish education, notably in the process of curriculum design. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), for instance, consists of partners as represented by teachers, school management bodies, parents, and specific interest groups ranging from trade union and business groups to Irish-language and other specialist groups. The value and benefits of a partnership approach to education policy and national curriculum design in particular have been discussed and documented, as have its weaknesses and deficits (Granville, 2004; Gleeson, 2010).

The established education partners do not include students, but in recent years the need to include student voice in policymaking has been recognised (Fleming, 2015; DoE, 2021). How best to provide an authentic role for students presents a challenge to current policymaking systems. Two distinct but related issues emerge from consideration of student voice in national policy formation. First is the extent to which the voices of students can be heard in the policymaking discourse and the extent of their influence on the outcomes of that process. Second, perhaps less obviously, is the extent to which emergent national policy provides for student voice in the curriculum as interpreted and enacted at school level.

The identification of student voice as a crucial element in schooling also serves to highlight a prominent but often overlooked feature of schooling: its socialisation function. By framing the process of education within the rules and parameters of the school, which are a microcosm of the rules and parameters of wider society, the experience of education becomes an imposition of values, norms, and culture. It becomes an expression of power, not just in the sense of authority and influence but in the hidden transactions, procedures, customs, and protocols of everyday living.

Student Voice in Curriculum Policy

Partnership strategies for representation or participation?



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The experience of the NCCA Development Group (DG) for Leaving Certificate Art may serve to illustrate how the concept of student voice currently manifests in curriculum design at national level.¹ The membership of the DG reflected the compositional format of all such groups in the NCCA: teacher unions, subject association, Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, State Examinations Commission, and, as a senior-cycle development group, representatives from higher education and business interests. There was no student representation as such.

However, fieldwork with current and former school students was carried out to augment the deliberations of the group, involving a series of focus groups in three schools of different types and locations and in three art colleges. The focus groups were carried out by Fred Boss, NCCA education officer for art, under the guidance of Dr Paula Flynn, who advised the NCCA on student voice practices (Flynn, 2017). Condensed recordings of students discussing their experiences and expectations of art in school, and their recommendations and desires for any new programme, were presented and discussed at DG meetings. The students who participated were subsequently re-engaged with, and the outcomes of the process were shared with them.

“The NCCA has adopted the principles of the Lundy model of student voice as an operational practice.”

The NCCA has adopted the principles of the Lundy model (Lundy, 2007) of student voice as an operational practice. These principles specify four conditions for effective and true engagement of students' voice: *space* in which students can express their views, *voice* for students to express their views, *audience* that listens to those views, and *influence* through identifying the response to those views as manifested in policy and practice.

The procedures of student-voice activity exemplify the distinction between representative and participative democracy. The partnership model of policymaking that is manifest in the NCCA is essentially that of representative democracy. It captures all four components of Bolman and Deal's (2021) model of organisational analysis: the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames are all accommodated.

The limitations of purely representative democracy are highlighted when the question of student voice is considered. A simple response to the issue would be to allocate a place to a school student or two on every DG in the NCCA committee system: this would ostensibly address the issue of representation, but it would be entirely inappropriate in terms of participation. At the simplest level, it would place the student in an invidious position, being expected to engage in a form of discourse and interaction at which they would have little or no experience, let alone confidence and ease.

More significantly, it would presuppose that the form and content of such discourse are the only valid mode of engagement with the topic. The community of practice established through the NCCA committee system has its own unconscious self-protection and replication process, which severely reduces the possibility of radical change or thinking outside the box. Not only would allocating a seat at the table to a student or two be unfair on the students and inadequate to represent the diversity of student

voices, it would also co-opt the students into a system, process, and culture that may be oppressive and inappropriate.

The place of student voice in the formulation of curriculum policy might therefore be best expressed in two forms. First would be an authentic attempt to ascertain some of the wide range of (frequently contradictory) views that students have on every aspect of their curriculum experience. The student voice input to the Leaving Cert Art DG in this respect was helpful and constructive, providing coherent, considered, and diverse views. It was not comprehensive or representative, nor did it purport to be. Second, and most importantly, the curriculum design that emerges from the work of such DGs should be consciously shaped to allow students' diverse views and inputs to be manifested where they can really count – at the level of the school and the classroom.

The culture of teaching and learning in Art has of course always been different from that of most other school subjects. The nature of the subject requires a response from each student in all activities, and a great deal of autonomous decision-making by the teacher. But the current policy environment of education – and indeed of wider public policy – puts repeated emphasis on developing such creative and critical capacities.

“The first pillar of the Creative Ireland programme is concentrated on creative work with young people in schools and in the wider community.”

For instance, the first pillar of the Creative Ireland programme, a cross-government initiative designed to promote creative engagement across all sections of the population, is concentrated on creative work with young people in schools and in the wider community. Similarly, the Department of Education recognises that education is about more than academic performance: it is also about 'students' personal development, self-actualisation, civic mindedness, wellbeing and capacity for self-expression' (DoE, 2021, p. 18). In curriculum policy, fostering student wellbeing has a prominence and priority that has never been so visible before.

In this policy context, the importance of student voice becomes even more apparent. Two cautionary notes should be sounded, however. First, we need to avoid too narrow or literal an interpretation of 'voice'. An interpretation that expects student voice to be expressed only in formal, verbal form, and in the cultural mode expected in a formal meeting with agendas, minutes, and all the rest, is inappropriate: such a model can be no more than an oppressive form of ventriloquism. Young people, from early childhood onwards, can express their feelings and thoughts in a variety of ways (Hill, 2021, p. 61). Teachers engage with their voice by attending to them, being present for them, and responding in the moment to their thoughts as expressed through various forms and media.

Second, it is important not to engage in a quasi-democratic process with a veneer of participation rather than true engagement. Curriculum specifications should provide for organic and differentiated views to be heard at local level, by always ensuring that teachers and students have enough time and space to explore and follow aspects of their subject that are not centrally specified. The old Irish custom of the farmer leaving one corner of the field wild and untilld (*cúinne an ghiorria*, the hare's corner),

to allow organic and unplanned natural processes to take place, can serve as a good model of curriculum development that allows the student voice to be heard and acknowledged in a participative practice.

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ENDNOTES

1. The NCCA Development Group for Leaving Certificate Art was established in 2017 and had nine full meetings and a number of subgroup meetings over 18 months. The author was independent chair of the group. Its recommendations were accepted by the NCCA and the Minister for Education and became live from September 2021.

“The old Irish custom of the farmer leaving one corner of the field wild and untilld to allow organic and unplanned natural processes to take place, can serve as a good model of curriculum development that allows the student voice to be heard and acknowledged in a participative practice.”

Gary Granville

Covid-19 has significantly disrupted education and training worldwide and in the European Union. This article presents the process of policy reflection and formation at the European Commission in the field of education, looking at the challenges, objectives, and framework for cooperation at EU level. The key instruments include the European Semester, European Education Area, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility as the centrepiece of NextGenerationEU.

Covid-19 has put unprecedented pressure on education and training worldwide. The pandemic and the subsequent move to remote or blended learning have been a watershed event for Member States' education and training systems, strongly affecting students' and teachers' wellbeing. Countries faced similar challenges during the crisis, in providing all learners with access to online learning; helping children to cope with the lack of social interaction with friends, classmates, and teachers; and supporting them when confronted with challenges they faced in their families.

Despite efforts and some progress in recent years, too many young people in the European Union (EU) still leave education and training without upper-secondary qualification, and one in five 15-year-olds do not reach sufficient competences in reading, mathematics, or science. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among those leaving education and training early or not having sufficient competences (European Commission, 2020, pp. 12–13). Additionally, pupils' wellbeing and sense of belonging to school are declining, with many suffering from bullying or violence at school (OECD, 2019).

The health crisis is likely to have worsened the situation, with especially detrimental effects on disadvantaged learners in all European countries (European Commission, 2020, p. 11). Supporting teachers and schools, including the wellbeing of school staff and students, in the aftermath of the pandemic will be key to prevent disengagement and school failure of many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Support to tackle the pandemic's impact on education and training

Member States are solely responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems. EU policies in the fields of education and training are designed to facilitate

European Cooperation in Education

Policy reflection and development in the field of education at the European Commission



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the exchange among Member States and to help address common challenges such as skills deficits, an ageing teaching force, the requirements of technological developments, and the green and digital transitions.

In light of Covid-19, the ambition of the European Commission is to support Member States to prevent the crisis from creating long-term structural barriers to the young generations' future (European Commission, 2020, p. 3). Helping young people to reach their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic background, is the guiding principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (Council of the European Union, 2017). There are two ways the Commission can support Member States: by facilitating exchange among Member States, and by providing financial support for their initiatives and projects.

Looking at the money first, relevant financial support for education in the last decades came from the Structural Funds (European Social Funds and European Regional and Development Funds), but also the Erasmus+ programme supported a huge number of initiatives in schools, higher education institutions, vocational education and training (VET), and adult learning. Both will play an important role also in future.

In addition, existing European funds were reallocated in recent months to help Member States to address their most urgent needs resulting from the pandemic. The main instrument to recover and emerge stronger from the pandemic is NextGenerationEU, providing substantial financial support to Member States.

Its centrepiece is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), providing up to €675 billion in grants (€312.5b) and loans (€360b). The RRF supports sustainable and growth-enhancing reforms and investments to help recovery and build institutional capacity, essential to reduce inequalities and divergences in the Union. Among its six pillars are policies for the next generation, for children and young people.

Member States have prepared national plans under RRF, and, according to provisional calculations, all education levels and sectors will benefit from major investments. At least 37% of the total expenditure will be devoted to climate-related investments, and at least 20% to promoting digital transitions (European Parliament and the Council, 2021).

European cooperation and exchange about education policies takes place at different levels. The European Semester, a framework for the coordination of economic policies across the EU since 2010, has allowed EU countries to discuss their economic and budget plans and monitor progress. In its context, the Commission carries out country analyses across a range of policy areas, including education and training.

These analyses support EU Member States to address social challenges identified at EU, national, and regional level. They also assess progress made on implementing necessary reforms and investments. Based on its analyses, the Commission proposes country-specific recommendations to each Member State, which are then discussed and adopted in the Council. In the

“ The main instrument to recover and emerge stronger from the pandemic is NextGenerationEU, providing substantial financial support to Member States.

area of education and training, recommendations often address the need to improve basic and digital skills, as well as the quality and inclusiveness of education and training. The European Semester will be closely linked to NextGenerationEU and the recovery from the crisis.

More specifically, in the area of education and training, Member States have worked for the two last decades in the so-called open method of coordination: they agree on common targets and exchange on the different approaches in Member States to achieve these targets. The current cycle of cooperation, launched in 2021, is shaped by the ambition to create a European Education Area (EEA), a genuine European space of learning, which benefits all learners, teachers, and institutions.

This ambition has gained even more relevance in light of Covid-19. The pandemic increased the risk of learning losses, disengagement, and lack of access to high-quality remote or blended learning for young people, as well as affecting some students' mental health. Debates at European level show that Member States are interested in exchanging on good practices to stop the crisis from hampering learning and skills development – and consequently employment prospects and participation in society. The EEA therefore ties in with NextGenerationEU and the European Semester. It aims to develop a holistic approach to EU action in education and training.

European Education Area and the way forward

To allow the EEA to become a reality by 2025, and to keep track of the progress achieved, the Council agreed on seven EU-level targets to be reached (Council of the European Union, 2021):

1. The share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science should be less than 15% by 2030.
2. The share of low-achieving eighth-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15% by 2030.
3. At least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care by 2030.
4. The share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 9% by 2030.
5. The share of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45% by 2030.
6. The share of recent graduates from VET benefiting from exposure to work-based learning during their VET should be at least 60% by 2025.
7. At least 47% of adults aged 25–64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months by 2025.

An online European Education Area platform will serve as a public gateway and ensure transparency and access to information on the EEA and the outputs of policy cooperation. This cooperation will be based on working groups addressing the key challenges in early childhood education and care, schools, higher education, vocational education and training, and adult learning. Working groups will also be created to discuss digital education, equality, and values in education and training.

Representatives from all Member States can engage in peer learning activities and peer counselling, aiming to profit as much as possible from the experiences made in different parts of Europe. The annual Education and Training Monitor, published by the European Commission, reports on Member States' progress towards achieving the EEA 2030 targets. It gathers a wide range of evidence to indicate the evolution of national education and training systems across the EU.

The Monitor comprises a cross-country comparison and 27 in-depth country reports. Its lead theme in 2020 was digital education and digital competence, and in 2021 it was wellbeing in education, including the impact of Covid-19. This analysis also feeds into the evaluation of broader socio-economic progress by Member States in the framework of the European Semester.

A new initiative launched by the European Commission in 2021 is Pathways to School Success. It looks for policies to improve basic skills and reduce further early school leaving, addressing exactly the educational problems that the pandemic might have increased: school failure and unequal access to high-quality education. Creating positive and welcoming learning environments, improving mental health and wellbeing, and fighting bullying will be at its centre.

Education and training will play an important role in recovering from the crisis, in building a greener and more resilient Europe, and in mastering the digital transition. Education and training also play an enormous role for each person in the EU: for children and young people to develop the right skills and competences to have a good start in life, and for adults to adapt to new requirement in the labour market and in society.

Member States can profit a lot from European cooperation. With all the challenges ahead of us, the next years will be a tremendously interesting and challenging time in this cooperation.

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This introduction to universal design for learning (UDL) talks about variability, a key concept underpinning UDL, then describes the concept of UDL and its three principles of enactment, representation, and action and expression.

The last decade has seen many changes in Irish education. These changes have embraced more inclusive approaches to education and challenged teachers to design and teach lessons that are suitable for a more diverse range of students than were in our classrooms two decades ago.

A recent study (Flood & Banks, 2021) suggests that universal design for learning (UDL) is gaining momentum in Ireland as a way for the system and teachers to meet this challenge. Relative to Irish secondary education, it provides examples of UDL emerging through our use of learning outcomes across sectors, the Framework for Junior Cycle's (Department of Education, 2015) flexible pathways, and its use of classroom-based assessments.

This introduction to UDL talks first about variability, a key concept underpinning UDL, before describing the concept of UDL and its three principles of enactment, representation, and action and expression.

From categories of need to variability

Variability is a dominant feature of UDL because it is the dominant feature of the nervous system (Meyer et al., 2014; CAST, 2018b). There is no single way that a brain will respond to the learning environment. Because there is no 'average' brain and therefore no 'average' student, we need to stop planning, teaching, and assessing based on that idea.

While categories of need played a significant role in gaining resources for students for over a decade, we know that our students are so much more than a label. The new model of allocation for teaching resources recognises this and removes the need for labelling by giving autonomy to schools on how they use their resources (Department of Education, 2017).

This opportunity to 'unlabel' our students reduces the risk of developing fixed mindsets about groups of students, making inaccurate assumptions

An Introduction to Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Inclusion through variability



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about them (Posey & Novak, 2020), or indeed offering only some students a particular strategy that could benefit many, because it is considered a support for a particular group.

Variability recognises not only the diversity in a group of students but also the variability within each student. It considers the 'jagged profile' (Rose, 2016) as a more comprehensive way of identifying a holistic view of our students' strengths and areas for support. This jagged-profile approach to variability pays attention to context and the environment that facilitates intentional design to remove barriers to learning.

For teachers, the fear may be how to design for the variability of a class of up to 30 students. The UDL Guidelines and associated checkpoints correspond to the nervous system and brain structure to help teachers address the predictable variability in learning that we know will be present in any environment (Meyer et al., 2014; CAST, 2018a).

UDL encourages moving away from thinking about our students and lesson design in terms of ability and disability, to thinking in terms of this variability. Through this UDL mindset, students are not labelled by their disability, social background, gender, race, and so on. It is not 'just for' the student with special educational needs: it is for every student.

What is UDL?

Universal design for learning is a change in mindset and a framework for inclusion. UDL is a proactive approach to learning, teaching, and assessment design that supports the varied identities, competencies, learning strengths, and needs of every student in our classroom and school community. The UDL Guidelines are the tool to support the enactment of inclusive practices.

UDL is about ensuring that a variety of pathways (choice and flexibility) are offered to students for understanding content; that goals are clear and specific to the expected outcome; and that student assessment is flexibly designed to enable every student to demonstrate their knowledge, values, understanding, and skills in a variety of ways (Meyer et al., 2014). In this light, UDL has the potential to promote the engagement and independence of our students to become what Meyer et al. describe as 'expert learners'.

In UDL, barriers to learning are the environment, curriculum, and context, not the student. These barriers can be removed by designing intentionally for predictable variability. As we strive to create meaningful and purposeful learning experiences for every student, with the goal of developing expert learners, UDL highlights three design principles that provide a map for teachers: engagement, representation, and action and expression.

The UDL Guidelines offer recommendations, or checkpoints, for enacting each UDL principle. Let's look at these guidelines more closely.

Multiple means of engagement

We know that students differ greatly in the ways they can be engaged or motivated, and that external factors can impact on this. Here we need to ask ourselves: How can and will our students engage?

To facilitate student engagement, we need to consider variability. Various elements can influence individual variation in how students engage, including neurology, culture, personal relevance, subjectivity, and background knowledge. In reality there is not one means of engagement that will work best for every student in every context.

Some will be immediately turned off by the task or topic. Others will be interested and ready to participate straight away. Some will tire easily and lose interest because of the physical or cognitive effort involved in achieving the learning goal. Others will look forward to the practical elements. If we provide multiple, intentionally designed options for engagement, then we will offer a way in for each student.

Multiple means of representation

We know that every student perceives and comprehends the information presented to them differently. Here we need to ask ourselves: How will students perceive the content we present? And then: How do we present our content in a way that provides access for each of our students to engage with the learning?

Like engagement, there is not a one-size-fits-all means of representation. Some will not have sufficient access through text and will process information better through visual or auditory means. Others will enjoy independently exploring the content. Some will work better if they can access instructions in stages as they work through the content or task.

Multiple means of action and expression

We know that every student navigates their learning environment and expresses what they know differently. Here we need to ask ourselves: How can our students best act on their learning and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, skills, and values? And are we giving students the opportunity to show their best selves?

Again, there is no one perfect means of action and expression. It is about being clear on the goal of the task and providing those intentional options to students that enable them to achieve. Some will not know how to start a task or how to express themselves clearly, or they may be unable to plan their actions. Others will have a system for planning their actions and will easily craft an essay, project, or presentation to display their knowledge. Some may be able to express themselves well in writing but not speech, and vice versa. Thus, if only one act of expression is offered to students, they may feel they will not accomplish the task well – and we're back to engagement.

UDL offers key questions to consider when planning lessons. Teachers might find them helpful as they begin their own UDL journey – see Figure 1.

But providing intention or the correct 'multiple means of' can happen only if we are clear about the goal.

Key questions to consider when planning lessons

Think about how learners will engage with the lesson.



Does the lesson provide options that can help all learners:

- regulate their own learning?
- sustain effort and motivation?
- engage and interest all learners?

Think about how information is presented to learners.



Does the information provide options that help all learners:

- reach higher levels of comprehension and understanding?
- understand the symbols and expressions?
- perceive what needs to be learned?

Think about how learners are expected to act strategically & express themselves.



Does the activity provide options that help all learners:

- act strategically?
- express themselves fluently?
- physically respond?

Figure 1: Key questions to consider when planning lessons (CAST, n.d.)

Does UDL work?

While much of the research to date on UDL is based in neuroscience, there is emerging evidence that UDL is influencing teacher change and practice. Evidence-based research on student outcomes is, as yet, limited (Capp, 2017; Flood & Banks, 2021). But the available research is promising and shows UDL's potential to have a positive impact on student outcomes.

UDL requires us to reflect on the following questions when planning for learning, teaching, assessment, and student success:

1. Why should our students care about the learning goal in front of them? (*engagement*)
2. How can students build their understanding of the learning goal in front of them, and how are we supporting this? (*representation*)
3. What options are we providing for our students to truly communicate and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, skills and values? (*action and expression*)

If we use the UDL guidelines to help us address these questions, then we should see improved student outcomes. But, like all endeavours, this takes time.

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Pictured at the launch of the Leaving Cert Results Helpline in September 2021:

Norma Foley, Minister for Education | **Mai Fanning**, President, National Parents Council Post-Primary (NPCPP) | **Katherine Donnelly**, Irish Independent | **Emer Neville** (seated), President, Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)

The Need to Invest in Education

A lesson from Covid-19

This article sets out some key issues in education and the teaching profession in Ireland that have been prominent during the pandemic. It argues that significant investment is required if we are to make worthwhile progress on what we have learned from Covid-19 across the second-level school system.

The pandemic has prompted a full-scale rethink across all aspects of society. There has been a lot of talk of a 'new normal'. In the world of education, an 'education-led recovery' and 'building back better' have characterised the lexicon emerging in the debate that seeks to reimagine the future in our schools. What might it all mean? This article makes some observations on three areas that gained particular prominence during the pandemic and about which hard decision-making is inevitable.

Investment is the key

The pandemic has fully exposed the deficiencies in investment in our social infrastructure: in hospitals, elder care, family services, services for people with disabilities – and in our schools. The digital divide in education effectively highlighted the other divides created by economic inequalities, social marginalisation, and lack of social inclusion.

It will be interesting to see how government policymakers will act once the pandemic, which has inflicted enormous harm and trauma on individuals and school communities, is consigned to the past. School communities will not resile in the coming months and years without state intervention and renewed investment to address the 'learning loss'. The EU Education and Training Monitor 2020 report stated that learning loss can be detected throughout the entire lifetime of affected students.¹ The task now is to prevent the emergence of long-term structural inequalities for the current generation of learners. One would hope that government will not revert to type and invoke austerity, the usual *modus operandi* favoured by neoliberal economics.



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The OECD has consistently reported that Ireland trails the field for investment in education as a percentage of GDP. The OECD Education at a Glance 2021 report ranks Ireland last out of 36 countries for investment in second-level

education. This is simply unacceptable: underinvestment in education is not only socially indefensible, it is economically short-sighted. All the literature on education and economic growth shows that quality of schooling is a powerful predictor of the wealth that a country will produce in the long run.

If Budget 2021 was anything to go by, the omens are not good. From the perspective of the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI), it was another missed opportunity to begin the necessary redress. Investment in schools will be vital to support any hopes of realising a vision for Ireland as an inclusive society. Smaller classes, improved buildings, safer school buildings, investment in digital technology, and restored guidance counsellor and middle management posts simply must be delivered to build a quality education system.

The government must invest in education into the future to ensure a sustainable, equitable, education-led recovery. It must put in place a comprehensive package for financing second-level education to support recovery and offset the damage of historical underinvestment. The ASTI has argued that the additional supports and funding provided during the crisis must be maintained and built upon. It would be reprehensible to withdraw these supports given the deficiencies in school financing that they are currently addressing.

Invest in teaching

Investment in education must also explicitly focus on investment in the teaching profession. The shift to remote education vividly demonstrated the importance of schools and the complexity of teachers' work. Contemporaneous academic research mirrored the public discourse, identifying teachers' high standards of professionalism, their capacity to adapt to change, their readiness to upskill and, above all, their ethical concerns about the holistic wellbeing of their students as key drivers in managing the shift to remote education.²

Education policy should aim at sustaining teacher professionalism by addressing issues such as workload, work intensification, declining teacher wellbeing, job satisfaction, and morale. ASTI-commissioned research has found that teachers' job satisfaction dropped from 77% in 2009 to 48% in 2020. It identified that teachers are working an average of 40-plus hours per week, with most non-teaching hours spent preparing for classroom teaching.³ This finding in itself indicates the complexity of teachers' work in the classroom and the need to reduce class-contact hours to give teachers professional time to manage their multiple professional roles.

Investing in the profession must also address the need for policy alignment and attention to system capacity. Teachers and school leaders have repeatedly identified 'innovation overload' as problematic. There is a need for a top-level policy dialogue on this systemic problem in advance of any new national strategies or change projects in our schools.

As part of this, the Department of Education must enlarge its vision for teachers' professional learning. It must move beyond a provider role (the

“ Investment in education must also explicitly focus on investment in the teaching profession.”

“ The introduction of unequal pay scales in 2011 remains a corrosive influence across the profession.”

provision of support services or agencies) to an enabling one, namely creating and maintaining the conditions for career-long teacher learning. The literature on teachers' professional learning is unequivocal on the importance of transformative rather than transmissive modalities.⁴ The current Departmental research evaluation on teachers' professional learning is highly important in this regard.⁵

The introduction of unequal pay scales in 2011 remains a corrosive influence across the profession. The situation is not just deeply resented by the thousands of teachers who have entered service since 2011 and do the same work for less pay. The whole profession is concerned about its impact on the attractiveness of teaching to graduates and on the overall status of the profession. It is a key driver of the current teacher supply problem.

Future-oriented digital learning strategy

The pandemic has accelerated the digital transition.⁶ The digital and economic transitions must be underpinned by a well-resourced education system. The pandemic has also confirmed that a healthy and balanced society does not just require universal public services: it also needs values and a commitment to the common good as a counterbalance to the market and its ideology of monetisation. In this regard, the digital divide in education must be a matter of concern.

A new national digital-learning strategy by the Department of Education must be innovative and sustainable and must address the inequalities so dramatically exposed by the pandemic. It must also address the wider social, ethical, and political issues created by digital technologies, and the extension of AI across all domains of society. The 2020 OECD report 'Educating 21st-Century Children: Emotional Wellbeing in the Digital Age' sets out high-priority issues for policymakers that are relevant to the development of Ireland's digital strategy.⁷ Equally significant is the PISA-based 2021 OECD report '21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World'.⁸

Systemic challenges to be tackled include financing to strengthen ICT infrastructure; ensuring that all teachers and students have laptops and adequate digital devices; investing in the teaching profession by providing professional time, reducing workload, and ensuring access to professional learning beyond the transmission of information; increasing the number of leadership posts in schools; developing a vision for digital literacy; and providing guidance on its integration into subjects and the wider curriculum.

A further requirement is alignment with other Departmental strategies, most notably the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, the revised Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and the Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development.

Assessment and curriculum change

The adoption of the school-based calculated-grades model for the Leaving Certificate exam in 2020 and the dual Leaving Cert/accredited-grades model in 2021 has renewed the focus on assessment. A disturbing feature of curriculum reform over the last decade has been the sense of alienation among the profession from the wider change project. Notwithstanding the partnership nature of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and other education agencies, at the level of the school – where curriculum reform hits the road, so to speak – teachers feel that their professional expertise and deep experiential knowledge are not sufficiently taken into account.

This is a problem. Transformative curriculum change takes place in the classroom, and ultimately the teacher is the mediator of this change. But this is predicated on teachers' support for the rationale for change, their engagement in the change process from the beginning, and their willingness to effect pedagogical and other professional practices in their day-to-day classroom teaching.

In its submission to the NCCA's Senior Cycle Review Consultation Document in October 2019, the ASTI noted that the strengths of the current model of external assessment of the Leaving Cert exam have been strongly endorsed in the consultation paper. These include a high level of public trust, its capacity to serve as a valid and objective statement of students' academic achievement, and its fairness, impartiality, and transparency. At the same time, there is a need to broaden the range of assessment to ensure that all aspects of students' learning are validated and recorded. The proposal to explore the role of second-component assessment for all subjects should be considered, as should the weighting of such components.

The ASTI has a distinguished tradition of contributing to the development of education policy at all levels and has implemented change across the decades. In a context where there will always be concern that the proverbial baby will be thrown out with the bathwater, it is worth reflecting on the conclusions reached by Professor Áine Hyland in her paper on entry into higher education. Namely, much of the stress and pressure on senior cycle students results from the role ascribed to the Leaving Cert exam: that of gatekeeper to entry to higher education as regulated by the CAO points system. Prof. Hyland's report stated:

The examination becomes the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention and, in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised. Student stress levels increase as the June examination looms and for some students their final year in school is an unhappy experience which they simply want to get through as quickly as possible.⁹

She concluded that an analysis of the current curriculum and its syllabi suggests the curriculum itself is not the key problem. Rather, the various subject syllabi are written in such a way as to require students to engage critically with subject content and to apply higher-order thinking skills.

Wise words. We have much to reflect on as we move forward with the review of the senior cycle curriculum.

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“Much of the stress and pressure on senior cycle students results from the role ascribed to the Leaving Cert exam: that of gatekeeper to entry to higher education as regulated by the CAO points system.”

Kieran Christie







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.
- 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

Step 1

- The applicant registers a SUSI account online at www.susi.ie
- The applicant completes and submits the application.
- Applicants must apply each year to renew their application.

Step 2

- Based on the information provided in the application, the applicant will receive either a decision letter or a letter requesting documentation so that SUSI can complete its assessment of the application.

Step 3

- Once the supporting documents have been reviewed, the applicant will be advised of the decision on their grant application by post. This will be either: A) Awarded or B) Refused

Step 4

- To receive payment, awarded students will need to have:
 - Registered with their college for the new academic year;
 - Been confirmed by their college as registered/attending;
 - Submitted their bank details through their online SUSI account.



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The Bridging Worlds project, funded by Reinvent Ireland, is an exploratory programme with the ambitious aim of creating a wraparound model linking the formal and non-formal education sectors. It provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers and in particular provides proactive provision to support marginalised groups. In the context of Covid-19's impact on young people's educational experiences, the project aims to bring together the formal and non-formal education sectors in a shared learning initiative.

When the normal educational system was paused in March 2020, many young people relied on the non-formal educational network for support and engagement. School closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequality and inequity (Darmody et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In young people's experience of lockdown, one of the most notable domains for development that emerged was the need to bridge the gap between formal and non-formal learning contexts.

This gap, and the pivot to more virtual spaces for learning, created an opportunity to re-evaluate, recognise, and reimagine the importance of a more holistic view of education, connecting formal and non-formal learning, and to seek to identify a way of aligning the two. The Bridging Worlds project, funded by Reinvent Ireland, is an exploratory programme with the ambitious aim of creating a wraparound model that links the formal and non-formal education sectors.

Bridging Worlds provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers who have a shared focus on the quality of all children's learning; in particular it provides proactive provision to support marginalised groups. In the context of the impact of the pandemic on the educational experiences of young people, the project aims to bring together the formal and non-formal education sectors in a shared learning initiative – see the figure below.

The theoretical framework informing the design of Bridging Worlds was based on the foundational ontological notion that there is a close, mutual interdependence between the physical environment of learning and the pedagogies enacting within it in the current digital world

Bridging Worlds

Building a bridge for our educational ecosystem and linking formal and non-formal learning

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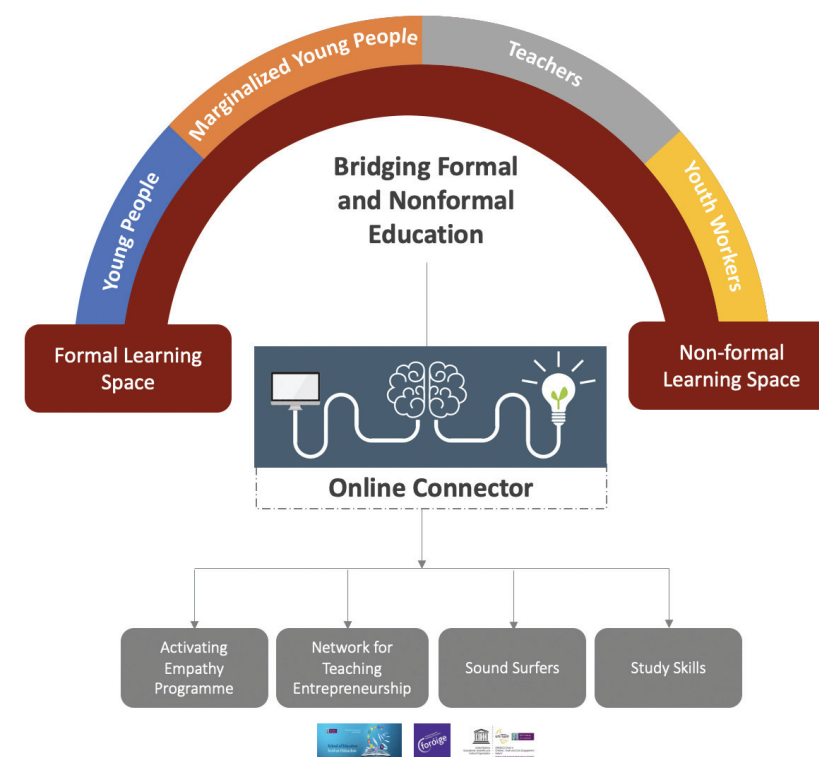
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(Freire, 1997; New, 2009; Brühlmeier, 2010; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Penuel, 2019; Salmon, 2019).



Bridging Worlds

The project's infrastructure and design aimed to create an equilibrium between the head, the heart, and the hands (Brühlmeier, 2010), thereby enhancing the inclusion of learners who were marginalised from more traditional and established learning environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was used to explore the ways the project enhances and extends the mesosystem between school teachers and youth workers.

Although Bridging Worlds is not a technology project, the capacity of teachers and the youth work community to deliver blended and online education and to support student engagement was central to the project, and to ensuring that this technology relationship integrated learning both outside and inside the regular classroom. Wenger's (2010) concept of a 'community of practice' was applied to establish whether the project could create a community, or 'hub', where parity of esteem was created in a more integrated and effective way.

Key project activities included training 40 teachers and 20 youth workers in online teaching and blended learning; creating local hubs linking teachers and youth workers to identify how non-formal and formal education can be better integrated to support marginalised young people; and providing innovative youth work programmes in schools and youth services.

This part of the project had four phases:

1. A half-day online training event provided by project coordinators to Transition Year teachers and youth workers in three counties
2. Online training to learn about at least one of Foróige's four Positive Youth Development Programmes
3. Transition Year teachers and youth workers delivering one of the Foróige programmes to young people they work with
4. Teachers and youth workers invited to avail of two follow-up one-to-one online sessions to review their experiences and receive further advice and support.

The project was successfully implemented despite the ongoing disruptions caused by Covid-19. It exceeded the aim of recruiting 60 participants: 35 teachers from 19 schools and 30 youth workers across 17 projects participated. Patterns of engagement varied over the programme, in particular when on-site school returned in the latter half of the academic year.

More time is needed to fully embed the initiative, to ensure that all participants implement the youth programme in their area of responsibility, and to create stronger exemplars of cross-sectoral hubs guiding and supporting teachers and youth workers. But the fact that this project was implemented in a time of considerable upheaval and disruption is testament to the efforts of the teachers, youth workers, young people, and project team who took part.

One of the four goals of Bridging Worlds is to establish the foundations and conditions to ensure that the project is scalable, with the ultimate vision to achieve national rollout. Notwithstanding the success and potential of Bridging Worlds, the legacy is a model where all young people can benefit from the intersection of formal and non-formal education – and for the disadvantaged who typically struggle, that their educational infrastructure will be better.

If you are interested in learning more about this project, getting involved, or receiving updates, please email learningspaces4newtimes@gmail.com or follow @bridging_worlds on Twitter.

“Bridging Worlds provides a comprehensive educational ecosystem to support young people, teachers, and youth workers who have a shared focus on the quality of all children's learning.”

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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 a year.

The major national ISTA events are the Senior Science Quiz – normally 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. It is hoped that the next conference will be held in person in the **Eureka Centre in UCC, Cork on 8th & 9th April 2022**. However, if there are restrictions due to the global pandemic then it will be held virtually online via a Zoom webinar. The theme this year is: **Senior Cycle Science Reform – Issues and Challenges**



For up-to-date information visit:
 Website: www.ista.ie
 Twitter: @IrishSciTeach
 Facebook: www.facebook.com/IrishScienceTeachersAssociation

Social inequality in education is an enduring feature of the Irish landscape, but the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted like never before the complex interplay between educational institutions and wider social structures which shapes unequal educational experiences and outcomes for Irish children and young people. This article explores educational inequality through this lens, and considers what can be done to build a better system as we return to normality.

The Covid-19 crisis has been a protracted series of ruptures that have laid bare the fault lines underneath our education system, even as they have made visible the resilience embedded in our school communities. These fault lines have primarily been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic, rather than created by it (a notable exception is the case of unequal access to broadband along geographic lines).

The move to remote learning and the general disruption of the last two years has had a particularly negative impact on students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs – two groups that, it must be noted, overlap significantly. Of course, these cohorts already included the students most at risk of early school leaving and least likely to progress to third-level education. By considering the efforts made to tackle educational disadvantage over recent decades in light of this shock to the system, we can see where they have succeeded and where they have fallen short.

Reflecting strong school-context effects, policy to address educational disadvantage has largely centred on targeting additional resources and supports towards schools serving the most disadvantaged populations. However, the gap in school completion rates between DEIS and non-DEIS school has remained stubbornly persistent and has in fact increased in recent years (DES, 2020).

Recent evidence from the Educational Research Centre also highlights a persistence of impacts of socio-economic disadvantage – largely reflected through student absenteeism and poor attention (Nelis et al., 2021). The analysis compared home and school learning environments, wellbeing, attitudes, and aspirations of 15-year-olds in schools, drawing on the OECD's 2018 PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment). Students in schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage

All in This Together?

New and enduring forms of inequality post-pandemic



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are more likely to lose out on learning because of using alcohol and drugs, missing school without authorisation, and not being attentive in class. They also have fewer educational resources in their homes and are less likely to aspire to go to higher education.

When the one relative constant across all students' experiences, the classroom, was removed, it quickly became apparent that families possess different resources – economic, social, and cultural – with which to respond, cope, and support their children in a massively disrupted learning context (Mohan et al., 2021). Students' home learning environments were more likely than the school learning environment to reproduce social inequalities. Several reasons underpinned this, such as the immediate cost implications of providing additional home learning supports, and problems that could not be solved in the short term like the need for space conducive to learning in the home and the quality of broadband connection.

Overall, the barriers to engagement intersected to make it more cumbersome and less rewarding to engage for vulnerable students. As well as these students being more likely to disengage, an equal level of disengagement is likely to have had a more detrimental impact on them than on more socio-economically advantaged students.

“The gap in school completion rates between DEIS and non-DEIS school has remained stubbornly persistent and has in fact increased in recent years.”

School-based stakeholders are acutely aware that this divergence may prove difficult or impossible to overcome, a fear supported by research on academic slippage over school holidays and unplanned interruptions to regular schooling. Acute and chronic stresses facing families clearly impacted on student engagement, with school leaders from DEIS schools particularly highlighting financial and personal difficulties encountered by parents or guardians, which reduced families' capacity to support students. The long-term benefits of remaining engaged became even more intangible for those struggling from day to day (Mohan et al., 2021).

A *Growing Up in Ireland* special report on participants' experiences during lockdown reinforces these findings, showing that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to have inadequate space in which to work, more likely to be in a stressed house, and less likely to have parents present to motivate them (Murray et al., 2021).

It should come as no surprise that schools could not offer the same quality of teaching and learning or fulfil many of their other key functions as effectively through remote learning. Classrooms and school buildings are highly refined and continuously evolving spaces designed for these purposes. Some of the most important features of these spaces, like the interpersonal relationships therein or the effective individual feedback provided by teachers to students, are particularly difficult to recreate over Zoom or Google Classrooms.

Almost all students will suffer some delay or loss of learning as a result, but the level and impact of this delay or loss will generally be higher among those experiencing difficulties. As well as greater challenges in comprehending material without properly differentiated instruction, the

lack of the non-academic features of the classroom impacts more on those struggling with the academic material.

What the closure of school buildings has highlighted is the responsibility placed on schools in combatting both educational disadvantage and wider social inequality. Students' engagement with education and their eventual academic outcomes are systemic phenomena, sitting at the intersection of their family background and home life, school environment, personal capacities and characteristics, and wider cultural milieu. The school environment, even given the significant variation across schools in terms of cohort demographics, school ethos, and other factors, is the closest thing to a constant for all students.

Giving all students an equal learning environment while the rest of their lives remains profoundly unequal, however, will inevitably recreate these inequalities generationally. Extra resources and targeted efforts for those most at risk of educational disadvantage are needed to ensure that the education system is actively combatting inequality rather than simply maintaining it. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic makes clear the level of inequality that students bring to the classroom by showing what happens to them without it. But the persistence (with slight fluctuations) of significant educational achievement gaps in the decades leading up to the pandemic shows that the education system has consistently fallen short on this front under 'normal conditions'.

“Initiatives to promote staff and students' mental health and flourishing will be particularly important.”

What schools can do to compensate for the Covid-19 education interruption is an important question at this juncture. The evidence suggests that targeted supports in the classroom environment and efforts to make school a place where students want to be are vital in reducing the impact of educational disadvantage. Continuing and expanding these efforts should be central in school planning, in the form of both intensive short-term responses and more sustainable long-term developments.

Initiatives to promote staff and students' mental health and flourishing will be particularly important. Positive education approaches can be an important resource to promote resilience and flourishing in students, focusing on developing young people's strengths and skills for happiness and their psychological, social, and emotional health in the educational context (Arslan & Burke, 2021). Wellbeing programmes at junior cycle will be key in supporting these needs, but senior cycle students need to be similarly supported.

Moving beyond the pandemic's impacts, evidence has increasingly pointed to high levels of deprivation and greater complexity of need in DEIS urban band 1 primary schools and the most disadvantaged second-level schools. Budget 2022 included a further one-point improvement in the staffing schedule for DEIS urban band 1 schools, alongside a new DEIS identification model.

These steps are welcome, especially for schools that have been dealing with DEIS-level complexity of needs without DEIS-level support, but will they

meaningfully address the entrenched gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools? As a society, we must ask ourselves whether this is the level of funding we are willing to commit to tackling educational disadvantage in schools and, by extension, whether this is the level of inequality we are willing to tolerate.

Finally, the difficulties of the Covid-19 period have shown that educational inequality cannot be solved by the education system alone. Schools, especially DEIS schools, are on the front line in dealing with students' issues in physical and mental health, housing, and poverty, but these issues obviously cannot be solved by teachers or school leaders. Initiatives like the DEIS scheme and the School Inclusion Model (currently being piloted) recognise and attempt to address this through providing key multidisciplinary supports in the school.

For students who are waiting months or years to receive needed support from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), or who are at risk of malnutrition or hunger or living in temporary or unsuitable accommodation, what happens in the classroom is unlikely to overcome what happens outside it. Disruption to these other services during the pandemic, from TUSLA social work to school-provided meals, was highlighted as directly and indirectly impacting on vulnerable students' ability to engage with school.

Much like the education system more generally, and society as a whole, these vital services pulled through as best they could in extremely difficult circumstances during the pandemic. As we return to 'business as usual', it is vital that we repair the damage done by two years of unprecedented disruption. Yet we cannot simply accept the restoration of pre-pandemic levels of inequality either. Educational inequality is a systemic phenomenon and must be addressed structurally and not just in the classroom, be it physical or virtual.

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Anticipating, monitoring, and adapting quickly to change, enjoying the change, and looking forward to more change in the future are all things that Post-Primary Languages Ireland has become familiar with in the pandemic. Many of the changes have been positive and have accelerated progress towards realising the implementation of Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education. Challenges have led to exciting new opportunities and projects, a few of which are outlined in this article.

#ThinkLanguages

The pandemic restrictions have made it challenging for schools to deal with Transition Year (TY) and its activities. In 2020, travel to a Dublin venue was no longer possible, so Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) sold the idea of a combined online and local event. #ThinkLanguages provided a platform for communicating the Languages Connect message to all audiences, promoting the many cultural, social, personal, and career benefits of foreign language skills.

It was an opportunity to 'think global, act local', and students got to organise their own school-based language events as part of the bigger event. The schools invite local speakers, have TY-led heritage-languages workshops, international food tasting, student-led salsa classes, and arts and crafts workshops, to name just some activities.

Pre-recorded workshops and resources, as well as some live workshops, are also offered to schools. These culture-themed language workshops and activities are available throughout the day and beyond the event. The workshop facilitators have been filmed in their relevant environments and can therefore show students exactly what they are talking about, all the time making language learning engaging, relevant, and fun and showing the value of using a foreign language in a career. This all expands the opportunities to frame language learning in context; for example, French and Fashion was filmed in Paris and included an interview with a French fashion designer who works in haute couture.

The benefits of moving away from a Dublin event came as a surprise. For one thing, local events provide additional capacity, so more schools and more students can participate. In 2021, 150 schools will do so, bringing the number of participating TY students to 12,000 – a 400% increase on the last time a central venue provided the focus. TY

Continuing the Implementation of Languages Connect

Navigating unprecedented change and progress through the pandemic



Karen Ruddock
Director of Post-Primary Languages Ireland

“ There is a new realisation of the value of the online context for making connections, which in these uncertain times is more important than ever.

students who previously disappeared on a bus away from the school now become agents of change in this broadened awareness-raising activity, and the event and work involved are visible to everyone in the school community.

The value of collaboration, which is central to change, has been strengthened, as have the links forged between PPLI and the schools, TY students, and TY coordinators in providing support for the event. Through these strengthened connections and associated projects and dissemination, TY coordinators and teachers of foreign languages are facilitated in delivering important messaging and necessary changes that are so much part of the Languages Connect strategy.

There is also a new realisation of the value of the online context for making connections, which in these uncertain times is more important than ever. It is possible to be responsive in addressing schools' needs and concerns in staging the event, by offering the opportunity to attend virtual information meetings and communities of practice for involved teachers – this would not be possible to provide face-to-face for teachers seeking to attend from every corner of the country. They are able to log in without leaving their homes and have all their questions addressed in a timely manner.

Students are finding out what languages are spoken in their schools, and many students and teachers are surprised to discover just how diverse their linguistic community is. Students who speak other languages are given a voice for the day, which adds to their wellbeing and gives them pride in their identity. Their languages are celebrated as a resource rather than seen as a hindrance, and this supports greater inclusion and appreciation of diversity.

Feedback from the 2020 event included the following:

We discovered the true diversity of languages spoken in our school community and were blown away by it! We got to highlight and celebrate languages across a week of events; we've never done that before.
(Borrisokane Community College)

The positive atmosphere around the entire school all week – a great buzz! It was really needed this year! (Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, Glanmire)

There was a such a fabulous atmosphere in the school, a great buzz. The principal was so impressed with the student leadership that she would like every department to run a similar event. The students enjoyed the opportunity to run an event – a great insight into event management as a career. They learned that there is a lot of preparation that goes on behind the scenes and how to adapt when things do not go exactly to plan. Thank you!! (Stepaside Educate Together Secondary School)

Blended learning

PPLI is currently involved in a number of pilot projects for blended models of language teaching and learning. Their aim is to support students of the new curricular languages – Lithuanian, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, and Portuguese – in particular those who are in senior cycle and wish to sit their Leaving Certificate in one of these languages but do not have access to the courses in school; or where the number of students in any one school does not constitute a critical mass.

The pandemic has encouraged a new openness to alternative pathways for teaching and learning. Acceptance of change has been necessary, and the status quo has been broken down, accelerating the introduction of new modes of provision.

In the context of implementing Polish, a combination of online and face-to-face teaching has emerged as a pilot project in collaboration with Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB). Together with H2 Learning, PPLI and CMETB introduced a taster blended-learning project in March 2021 for TY students wishing to study Polish for their Leaving Cert. The full course was implemented in September 2021. Seventeen students from five post-primary schools in CMETB are engaged in the first blended Leaving Cert course. Students receive 3 hours a week of combined online, face-to-face, and self-directed study periods. The teacher is employed by PPLI and receives the support of an eMentor designated by each participating school.

The hope is that this mode of provision will become available to students in more schools, and that this would enable significant numbers of migrant Polish speakers to maintain literacy in their home language. It is seen as a community response to the Programme for Government to embrace diversity in Cavan and Monaghan ETB.

PPLI is also piloting Saturday blended-learning courses for Leaving Cert Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese. These pilot courses aim to develop an alternative blended model of provision for students who do not have access to the curriculum in schools. Two groups of fifth-year students have been selected across the country to participate in this two-year project. The course is being conducted mainly online, with some events taking place face-to-face at a central location. The technical aspects of online teaching and learning are facilitated by eSchool at H2 Learning using Microsoft Teams as the main platform.

All teachers participating in the blended learning pilot projects have received training tailored to their particular teaching and learning context. This includes training on different aspects of blended language classes related to teaching (e.g., planning and building blocks in a blended model), cognition (e.g., task-based learning, assessment and reflection in blended learning classes), and social wellbeing (e.g., facilitating discussion and student participation, communicating with school). Teachers are supported by teaching and learning experts in PPLI (education officers and associates), technological experts in cooperating partner organisations (e.g., H2

“The pandemic has encouraged a new openness to alternative pathways for teaching and learning.”

“At PPLI (Post-Primary Languages Ireland) we determined to make online learning accessible, focusing on the benefits of the changes and providing the appropriate support.”

Learning and eSchool), and supporting staff in cooperating schools (e.g., eMentors).

These pilots will inform the future development of courses and modules as additional or alternative means of implementing language education at the post-primary level and beyond.

Teacher CPD and support

In a general sense, teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) needs and the support they require have also changed. But teachers who had never previously engaged in CPD looked for support as a result of the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) that they were faced with.

At PPLI we determined to make online learning accessible, focusing on the benefits of the changes and providing the appropriate support. Some teachers, accustomed to more traditional methodologies, initially panicked or were overwhelmed by the new methodologies, and particularly by the additional time involved in planning classes. They needed reassurance that we would provide support and give them the guidance they needed to learn to adapt. We surveyed all our teachers about their fears, doubts, and uncertainties and then committed to addressing these. We quickly demonstrated that we were committed to organising CPD sessions and tutorials not just on the technologies but also on the new methodologies required.

Some went into denial and ignored the advice and support we were providing. On reflection, we could have shared the Kübler-Ross curve with our teachers as a way of encouraging them, because it would have normalised the challenges they were experiencing and reminded us all that the different reactions to the changes were normal.

As ERT continued, we encouraged the teachers to try new things as they began to explore using more of the new methodologies. We provided clinics that they could drop in to once a week to seek support and guidance where they needed it. These changes need time to embed. We tried not to make the teachers do too much at once; instead we asked them to try one new methodology at a time, and when they were comfortable with it to introduce another. We also provided mentoring through observation of classes and formative feedback. This gave the teachers direction as they learned to explore and accept the changes.

The pandemic has made some teachers embrace technology that would have appeared inaccessible to them before. Teachers have shown that they are responsive to change, and they reflect that they have benefited from a new understanding of how to increase student engagement in the face-to-face classroom; this has contributed greatly to their success in providing a quality experience in the new normal. They also reflect that they are sharing more good practice and providing more support for one another – all very positive outcomes from what has been a very challenging journey.

With contributions from four members of staff, this article looks at the development of distributed leadership in John the Baptist Community School in Hospital, County Limerick, and how that culture served the school positively during the pandemic.

My name is Noreen Rafferty. I am principal of John the Baptist Community School (JTBCS) in Hospital, County Limerick, which has over 1,100 students. We have an effective senior management team, mainly because there is clarity about our roles, informed by great discussion and collaboration. We identified our strengths and passions and assigned our roles accordingly. This has allowed us to be more dynamic and agile in adapting to change.

We have a vision meeting at least twice a year, at which we discuss our vision for the school and our roles. This gives us the time to plan for school-wide initiatives. We meet Dr Joe O'Connell three times a year as part of our own continuing professional development (CPD). This gives the team time and space to grow together.

We attend all conferences and workshops run by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS). Our work with Áine O Sullivan in ACCS is invaluable. We have been mentored, encouraged, and challenged by it. This work has kept us excited about leadership, especially distributive leadership.

Our role assignment is based on the Looking at Our Schools (LAOS) document. Each of us leads in one domain and shares responsibility in others, which helps us manage our workload. For example, deputy principal Elaine O'Donnell leads in teaching and learning, and we all work with her on promoting strategies in this area. Deputy principal Ita Browne leads the homework intervention programme and liaises with the teaching and learning team. Deputy principal Rachel Hayes leads digital enhanced learning but links in with the teaching and learning team on promoting learning and teaching strategies in subject departments.

As principal I have overall responsibility for all aspects of the educational enterprise and act as

Distributive Leadership



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Principal, John the Baptist Community School, Co. Limerick



Rachel Hayes

Deputy Principal, John the Baptist Community School, Co. Limerick



Joe O'Connor

Assistant Principal, John the Baptist Community School, Co. Limerick



Mary Sheehan

Assistant Principal and SSE Coordinator, John the Baptist Community School, Co. Limerick

accounting officer. I lead this but share responsibility with Rachel Hayes on the timetable, with Elaine O'Donnell on policymaking, and with Ita Browne on supervision and substitution. Communication is central to what we do in JTBCS. Effective communication allows us to embed distributive leadership in our school. We lead by example, we give clearly defined roles with ownership and autonomy, and we hold effective meetings.

We model leadership in the school by modelling our own team. We upskill constantly, gaining master's degrees, certificates, and diplomas in education, counselling, mediation, ICT, restorative practice (RP), and more. We encourage all teachers to upskill and give them the opportunities to do courses. Teachers have followed our example and are attending courses with the support of our board of management.

Middle management have clear roles. We give responsibility, ownership, and autonomy to assistant principals (AP1s and AP2s). For example, our teaching and learning, restorative practice, policy development, special educational needs (SEN), and student voice teams are all led by AP1s and AP2s. Our teachers can come to us and say, 'I have an idea', and they speak about how effective this is for them. Mentoring is also at the core of what we do. AP1s mentor AP2s as year heads. All AP1s and AP2s have responsibility for promoting teaching and learning, restorative practice, and ICT.

“ We have a vision meeting at least twice a year, at which we discuss our vision for the school and our roles. ”

We run effective meetings. AP1s and AP2s meet the senior management team three times a year. Their roles and responsibilities are discussed and assigned at the start of the year, and we check in at Christmas. The review happens in May. At these meetings they meet a different member of the senior management team than the person responsible for their area. This allows us to distribute our leadership across senior and middle management as a unit. Everyone also gets a great kick out of sharing what's going on in their role.

All teachers meet with the senior management team twice a year. This is a great opportunity to identify their passions and affirm the great work they do. Staff also present at various workshops organised by ACCS.

I will give two examples of how distributive leadership is embedded in JTBCS. The first is staff presenting to staff. This happens at all staff meetings – it is a culture in our school and has been happening since 2010. This year, 10 teachers presented in school self-evaluation (SSE), SEN, ICT, RP, health and safety, and student voice. All presentations were interlinked and student-centred.

The second example is from six years ago, when we went to a meeting organised by the NAPD. Following an excellent session on restorative practice, our team had a vision that we would become a restorative school. Our journey to becoming one in the years since is another excellent example of how distributive leadership is embedded in our school.

It started in the classroom with the teaching and learning team, led by AP1 Mary Sheehan, and the ICT team, led by AP11 Joe O'Connor and AP1 acting up Patrick Stack. Teaching strategies such as think-pair-share, show-me

board, and success criteria created a more restorative atmosphere in our classrooms. Students were mentored on the use of the reflection arrow, giving them experience in reflective practice in the classroom.

The pastoral care, student voice, ICT, and teaching and learning teams ran surveys and focus groups for parents, teachers, and students. Feedback showed us it was a natural progression for us to embark on the road to restorative practice. As a school community we are now ready to take it out of the classroom and into real life.

The teams involved have collective ownership. Leadership on restorative practice is now distributed not only among senior and middle management but also to every teacher and student in the school.

We have learned that things take time. We wanted this six years ago, but it is really happening now. It is one thing to say it is happening, another thing to live it. The following are stories of teachers in the school who describe their own journeys through our distributive leadership model.

Rachel's story (deputy principal)

I am the product of the mentoring, modelling, and collaboration that Noreen describes, as my journey is one of developing within the distributed leadership structure of the school. From the beginning, I was offered opportunities to take on leadership roles in teams. On my very first day, I was given the chance to become a student council liaison teacher; management recognised this passion from my time as a student.

“To be part of a team is not an exception in John the Baptist Community School – it is the norm.”

More chances to lead emerged, first as a leader of learning in my own classroom, inviting others to observe classes, and then as subject department head, allowing relationship-building. Management consistently encouraged me. The door was always open, even to the proposal of a murder mystery that killed a deputy principal (DP), with everyone else playing detective in a cross-curricular learning event. I also had the opportunity to be involved in teams working on the musical, the library, and IT. To be part of a team is not an exception in John the Baptist Community School – it is the norm.

Ever-present mentorship helped shape me. As a class tutor and an AP, I was in the room as year heads, DPs, and the principal worked with students and parents, allowing me to model the interactions. I was nudged, sometimes pushed beyond my comfort zone, but I was never alone. If not part of a team, it was accepted that building a team was the true measure of success.

When I became a DP, the clarity on our roles allowed a focus that could have been lost in the firefighting of daily school life but presented opportunities to grow and to adjust our roles as needed. Noreen built our innovative teaching and learning team but then handed it to me – a huge act of trust, predicated on the certainty that to be able to step back is the ultimate goal of distributed leadership.

After working with this team and Mary for three years, I passed the mantle on to Elaine O'Donnell. This allowed me to delve into the rapidly

expanding area of digital learning; distributed leadership helped me to manage the workload. This also enabled our SSE and digital learning goals to merge organically, which may never have been possible without the links, relationships, and knowledge developed through our collaborative approach.

Our digital learning team is characterised by mutual respect, our message developed through collaboration and feedback within the team and from all staff. Our co-leaders Joe (AP11) and Patrick (AP1 acting up) have embraced their opportunities. Together with leadership from each teacher, we have weathered the Covid-19 storm effectively, as you will hear from Joe below.

The addition this year of subject department digital mentors expands our team again, at the same time growing our technological and leadership capacity. Our secretary, Geraldine, is now on board to reset passwords, allowing the team to concentrate on embedding technology-enhanced learning.

The excellent ACCS Middle Leadership programme, certified by the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), is symbolic of how we view management. Noreen and I were involved in its development and delivery to schools around Ireland, deepening the conversation on the role, importance, and impact of middle leadership in schools.

If the job of a leader is to grow more leaders, I am living proof that John the Baptist Community School invites you to lead at every stage of your career.

Joe's story (AP11)

My name is Joe O'Connor. I am an AP11. Before becoming a post holder, I had presented, to the whole staff, digital resources that could be used as part of our numeracy strategy in the school. These were interactive PowerPoint presentations shared on our school server. It was the first time I took a lead in a presentation to staff.

Management encouraged me to join the SSE team and then the digital learning team. The SSE team that Noreen (as deputy principal) had set up was expanding at the time. Expressions of interest were sought, and I was encouraged to come on board. In this team I was given responsibility, and it's where I feel my leadership capacity really grew.

One example was when the SSE team developed a whole-staff internal CPD day on the new Junior Cycle. We had four rotating workshops, one of which I was in charge of: the 24 statements of learning for the Junior Cycle. I had full autonomy to be as creative as I could be and had the chance to model our SSE strategies throughout the workshop. I tried to make the session as active as possible, in the same way that I would want my maths students to learn by doing. We are all learners – students and staff alike. The task set was to design a new school bag for use in JTBCS. At the end of the session, groups would identify which of the 24 statements of learning they felt they had experienced.

Blue-sky thinking was the first SSE strategy introduced to encourage groups to think big. We discussed solar charging ports, which would be

quite the feature today, given Covid-19! In addition we used success criteria (*I must, I should, I could*) in designing the bag. We introduced critical verbs like *compare* and *evaluate* when groups had to appraise another group's bag. We used reflection number lines to rate our confidence before and after, and referred to some of Mike Hughes's work on the Magenta Principles of reduce and change. To illustrate how many of the 24 statements of learning had been targeted in this activity, we used a 'dotocracy' that everyone contributed to: a visual form of voting and consensus-building using dots.

My leadership capacity grew out of the autonomy I was given. I was able to facilitate staff engagement with SSE strategies in an active and (importantly) enjoyable way. There was great competition and fun between groups trying to design the best bag. None of us ever ceases learning, and I firmly believe that people learn best by doing and through experience.

The success of this day gave me the confidence as a leader to shape my next big whole-staff training: two days of active training in digital learning during Croke Park hours before the start of term. Staff would be set tasks to complete on various functions in Microsoft Teams. Again, we took an *I must, I should, I could* approach to differentiate for all levels. Staff would briefly be passive and receive some support from us, then were directed to complete tasks and use the open breakout rooms to seek help from colleagues. We had screen recordings prepared that guided staff through each process.

We wanted to encourage the 'flipped learning' approach where knowledge acquisition can occur independently at one's own pace, and live sessions (the breakout rooms) could take place afterwards to discuss in depth any issues, learnings, different ways to do the task, and so on. Much like a maths classroom, where you want collective problem-solving to occur. We wanted to instil in staff the confidence to take the initiative in their own digital learning.

Reflecting now, one year on, this approach has been a success. Staff engagement levels and expertise are rising continually, and the power of synergy is very evident with new members of staff providing new digital learning tips they have discovered themselves.

I am acutely aware of the leadership capacity that I have developed by being given opportunities, so I see it as my duty to give opportunities to other budding leaders among our staff. We have invited subject digital leaders to join our wider team. These leaders in turn have created their own resources that they have showcased at staff events or on our digital platform.

Halfway through our training days, we stopped to reflect and 'feel the pulse' of staff. We were greatly helped by senior management, who told us that some staff had found the pace too much. The LAOS document refers to 'critiquing our practice as leaders'. We adapted our CPD delivery to provide one-on-one or group training to staff in specific areas.

We are encouraged by senior management to take risks, and we are given the autonomy to do so. Learning flourishes for both the leader or administrator and the participant: 'The only real mistake is the one from which we don't learn.'

Mary's story (AP1)

My name is Mary Sheehan, and I am an AP1 and SSE coordinator in our school. My journey has been similar to Joe's, but today I will step back to reflect, from a wider perspective, on the lessons we have learned about how distributed leadership works effectively in our school.

The culture is key, cultivating the conditions by design or intent to nurture leadership at all levels. There is no blueprint for this journey. It is unique for each school, but it starts with a vision of where you would like to go. When I became an AP1, I spoke with Noreen, who was then deputy principal. We discussed our shared vision, then peeled back the layers to identify the building blocks in achieving that vision. We realised we were not ready yet.

We implemented a two-pronged approach. First, formally, by putting into action the building blocks towards realising the vision, while having the adaptability and agility to re-evaluate and reroute where necessary. This occurred many times. For example, our vision for home learning meant we had to step back and start by implementing strategies that involved effective questioning and reflection. We were also going to move to peer assessment, but student focus groups made us aware that they were not ready. So we implemented critical-vocabulary and success-criteria methodologies based on their advice. We are only now getting to focus on home learning.

“Blue-sky thinking was the first SSE strategy introduced to encourage groups to think big.”

Second, informally, by elevating the dialogue on deepening student thinking and learning, and by normalising this. This changed the culture in our school, which was pivotal, but that didn't happen quickly. We needed the foresight to sit in that process as it was happening, and to plan for its unfolding and be agile enough to reroute when needed, while keeping our focus on the vision.

So how did this culture develop? Key leaders had to be identified at the start. They acted as catalysts: people whose passion and skill were recognised and who were invited to embrace their potential and to step beyond their comfort zone – to take a risk, to try something, to be open to sharing and addressing failures. Uptake of the SSE strategies worked best when presented in this way: by teachers as leaders in situations where they worked or not, where they were remodelled to suit learning situations, where it was authentic. All teachers became engaged when we shared real-life experience, student work in copies, their own written responses, and multiple teachers' uses of the strategies.

Ultimately this drove innovation among all the teachers. At the same time, Noreen gave me opportunities in mentoring and modelling, to develop skills, experiences, and competencies, to lead teams, and to present to staff and professional learning communities. So I was also developing and expanding my leadership capacity.

Another aspect was empowering leaders with the time, influence, and skills to lead. This has had a profound positive effect on developing leadership capacity in the school. In my role I was given autonomy with accountability. Senior management gave me space and stood back; it

was not a hands-off approach but one that enabled me to step into the responsibility and possibility of my leadership role.

In the school, APs have a clearly defined role and take responsibility for one area. But they work with other people in many other areas to broaden their skills, competencies, and strengths, as Noreen describes above. This fosters teamwork and collective ownership as cultural norms in our school, to the point where we felt comfortable to lead our own Junior Cycle in-service, as Joe said. We knew we had developed the leadership capacity in our team and our liaising teachers to do this effectively. They did not just have the strategies presented to them, but truly engaged with them.

Understanding team dynamics has proven crucial to expanding leadership and encouraging ownership in our school. It was critical for us to understand how our teams work and what conditions led them to flourish. Central to establishing a positive team dynamic are relationships and trust, embracing flux, and the need to seek different voices and different teachers' perspectives.

We broaden teams to inject new insights. For example, we bring in teachers who have attended training by Graham Powell and Mike Hughes, or taken part in professional learning communities like ACCS Blended Learning Forum and Student Voice Forum. We learn from sharing practice with different schools, by engaging in these learning communities, in the Learning Schools Project, and in reflective practice.

Our teams focus on growth and being expansive. We have found over the years that six to eight members are the most effective, and that the teams must always be up to date on educational developments and informed by LAOS and international best practice. Integrating the teams – by having leaders occupy roles in multiple teams – has also been crucial, to ensure they are not fragmented and there are not too many disconnected innovations going on in our school.

It is about building connections and expanding our teams' influence. This is done intentionally by liaising with the various subject departments and by seeking teachers' collaboration as leaders in their own learning, for example producing and sharing videos of effective practice and lesson starters, which we are doing this week.

One voice is not the only voice. Teachers' opinions are sought on all strategies, for example in SSE, before these are implemented at whole-school level. Teachers approach these strategies at their own pace, from their position of leaders of the learning that occurs in their classroom, as opposed to being given the strategies to use. Reticent voices are deliberately sought in focus groups to inform our pathway forward. Teachers are encouraged to be engaged and are valued and respected as leaders in their classroom with expertise worth sharing. They are recognised, celebrated and seen.

Over the years, as leadership capacity has expanded in our school and innovations have been implemented and embedded in our practices, it has been vital to check in regularly with staff. Progression happens when teachers are ready. It can be destroyed by moving too fast, or staff may become unmotivated if things are not progressing quickly enough. It has

been crucial to develop the capacity to be aware of this and to be agile enough to respond to it.

This was why we decided to pause and have a consolidation year two years ago. This helped foster habits of mind in the effective embedding of the active learning strategies that were implemented in the first stages of SSE. It gave teachers the opportunity to really embed them in everyday practice. This deepened student thinking and learning.

Activating and elevating students as leaders has been at the core of distributing leadership in our school. Student opinions on the improvement of their learning are sought in forums, focus groups, group and class surveys, and year hub surveys. We are improving in this area particularly through our current participation in the ACCS Student Voice Forum. We have integrated random selection as a way to seek all voices and learners, including the reticent ones.

Students' role as co-researchers is made explicit to them, and after implementation we ask for feedback on its impact. There is space for students to voice their opinions, to influence, and to establish leadership roles in teams such as health and safety, Covid response, and student council, so they are leading in their school community. Student voices are central to deciding on active-learning strategies at the design stage. This gives students the opportunity to express their voices and lead their own learning.

We timetable meetings that place value on creating the conditions to develop leadership capacity. This gives leaders time to plan, discuss, reflect, and evaluate. It also gives time to create strong teams that are purposeful and focused – a skill that has to be acquired, repeated, and practised. Authentic change takes time, as does developing a culture of leading learning at all stages in the community. Noreen recognised this and provided the time and space for it to flourish.

It is important to establish boundaries. Respect for work-life balance, wellbeing, and the space in one's head to switch off is essential. Without these, there would be no vision, passion, or innovation.

So we are back to creating the conditions to nurture the development of this learning culture, by design or intent. Distributed leadership is not about dividing tasks and responsibilities among individuals: it is about interactions among people to seek improvement and improve students' learning. At its core are people and keeping them excited and passionate about learning.

Distributed leadership is about selecting key leaders with a passion for what they do, and building dynamic teams that are informed by national and international best practice and are rooted in everyone's collective expertise, so we are all going in the same direction together. It is about empowering them with time and influence, modelling and mentoring, and elevating the dialogue to lead to a culture of engagement, shared ownership, and belonging.



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Further Education & Training

THE LEARNER VOICE IN IRELAND

“Over the last five years, AONTAS has done an excellent job in creating a platform where learners come together to tell us about their experience of Further Education and Training.”

– Andrew Brownlee, CEO, SOLAS

“As one of the largest learner voice projects in Europe, the Forum empowers learners to authentically share their views so that we can continue to improve FET in Ireland. It has become a vital space for learners to share their experiences and challenges of engaging in FET courses, and more importantly, offering suggestions on how to improve this process.”

– Niamh O'Reilly, CEO, AONTAS

2021: A Milestone Year for FET and Apprenticeships

This piece offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in what proved a milestone year for the sector. It describes the major developments in FET and apprenticeship in 2021, outlines the policies and strategies at play, and looks ahead to an exciting 2022.

Introduction

2021 was a milestone year for further education and training (FET) and apprenticeships. The launch of the Central Applications Office (CAO) website in November was another important step in ensuring that these pathways are valued equally to traditional degree routes. For the first time, all of the further education and apprenticeship options are on the table alongside higher education choices when students are discussing and deciding their next steps after school.

The class of 2021–22 can now apply directly for over 650 further education courses within a few clicks from the CAO website. Information on 62 apprenticeship programmes is also directly available, including eligibility criteria, testimonials, job opportunities, and a freephone helpline on how to take the next step in becoming an apprentice in your chosen area of interest.

Ensuring greater awareness of the diverse pathways available is only the first step in the process, and simplifying access routes into FET and apprenticeship should immediately stimulate some additional interest. It has been no small feat to bring us to this point, with great collaboration from the CAO and intensive work by our own team in SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), and Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and strong support from our Ministers and Departments to see this through.

This should also serve as a major strategic development as it evolves in the medium and long term, starting to change the conversations between school leavers and their peers, teachers, guidance counsellors, and families and allow them to make smart choices about their futures. This will be done by working towards further integration with the CAO system, by refining ETB application processes to more consistent entry routes to FET, by more clearly promoting FET-HE (higher education) pathways within the resource, and by expanding the FET options available to



Andrew Brownlee
Chief Executive Officer,
SOLAS

include more practical and shorter-term opportunities for school leavers, including traineeships and focused skills training.

This is another critical reform in support of our central premise that FET be for *everyone*, a driving ambition of Transforming Learning, the Future FET strategy launched in 2019. The strategy focuses on three core priorities: building skills, facilitating pathways, and fostering inclusion. Alongside the CAO development, there have been many other highlights throughout the year in support of these priorities, which I discuss in more depth below.

Delivering on Ireland's critical skills priorities

There is increasing acknowledgement of the critical role that FET will play in developing the skills and expertise required to deliver on Housing for All and the Climate Action national policy agenda. Housing for All commits to building 33,000 new houses each year, but a significant skills pipeline will have to be put in place to support delivery of this plan. SOLAS is working with partners across government and industry to do this, with key areas of focus including apprenticeship catch-up and expansion; investment in non-apprenticeship FET provision; continued development of Safe Pass, with the establishment of an online delivery option from early 2022; and a major retrofitting upskilling programme.

This focus on retrofitting is also a core part of a green skills action programme funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Programme. There are currently two centres of excellence for retrofitting/NZEB (nearly zero-energy building), operated by Waterford and Wexford ETB and Laois and Offaly ETB; three more are planned for Cork, Limerick, and Sligo early in 2022, with 4,500 upskilling places to be delivered that year. There are also plans to develop and roll out a green skills module that can be embedded across every FET course, and to update apprenticeship curricula to reflect the need for such expertise across all trades.

Exciting new era for apprenticeships

The launch of the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025 signalled a move to a new single apprenticeship system, with an ambition to increase apprenticeship registrations to 10,000 per annum by 2025. A more consistent approach to governance, employer support, access, and funding across all apprenticeship programmes is planned, with a new National Apprenticeship Office to be set up, jointly managed by SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

A move to a more devolved, consortia-led delivery model for craft apprenticeships has also been flagged over the lifetime of the plan. This will be introduced in tandem with the expansion of capacity in craft apprenticeship provision, a critical priority both to address waiting lists for training due to Covid-19 restrictions over the last two years, and to meet the future skills needs flagged above. Investment of €20m to expand facilities, the recruitment of new instructors, and a new delivery model for phase 2

“For the first time, all the further education and apprenticeship options are on the table alongside higher education choices.”

“A really important development was the launch of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) 10-year strategy in September 2021.”

training involving three annual intakes instead of two are already playing a part in addressing the backlog, which peaked in the summer.

Flexible and online upskilling opportunities

There is continued expansion of eCollege as a free, open-access source of online, eTutor-supported FET since it opened at the onset of the pandemic. Around 35,000 learners a year are now participating in these courses, with a new focus on linking them to learning pathways through FET with ETBs. Covid-19 has also had a lasting impact on the labour market, with a significant base of people no longer able to return to their pre-restrictions jobs.

This prompted the launch of the Skills to Compete initiative to help them return to sustainable employment, with ETBs delivering flexible programmes to improve employability, develop the digital skills now required for virtually every job, and develop the specific skills required to target work in growth occupations and industries. To date, this has helped 16,700 people make the journey back towards employment.

Add to this the continued success of Skills to Advance, which provides free or heavily subsidised upskilling access to employers and their employees, with over 10,000 participants expected in 2021, and the FET system has shown remarkable agility and flexibility in responding to a transformed environment.

Adult Literacy for Life

A really important development was the launch of the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) 10-year strategy in September 2021 to address literacy, numeracy, and digital-inclusion needs via a cross-government and cross-society approach. A range of commitments and actions are in place across four pillars, to ensure people can *understand* their needs and where to go to meet them; that they can *access* all the learning and support they need; that the learning and support available can *expand* to meet this massive challenge; and that we *empower* people and communities to make a real difference to their lives.

A national programme office and 16 regional ALL coordinators and literacy coalitions are being established to drive the action and partnership required to respond holistically to local needs. A major national campaign and a new one-stop shop, www.adultliteracyforlife.ie, is also up and running to help direct those with unmet literacy needs to the support and resources they need.

Pandemic challenges

Allied to this, and to the need to facilitate access, tailor learning, and develop support for those furthest behind first, particularly in the context of Covid-19 restrictions, a second year of the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund was launched in 2022, with €10m available for community-based education. This is supporting activity in digital

technologies, learner assistance, outreach, engagement, and mentoring Fund and specific responses in the pandemic.

Of course, amidst all these positive developments, the continuing prevalence of Covid-19 constrains and impacts on FET's ability to operate effectively and fully support our learners. After a period of closure at the start of the year, and then the operation of FET facilities at significantly reduced capacity, a full return to onsite provision was finally possible only from September.

This has been important in beginning to address the significant backlog of apprentices waiting for off-the-job training referenced above. But it is also critical in enabling a full learning experience, particularly in the technical and vocational areas that characterise so much of FET, where practical face-to-face education and demonstration, and often work-based components, are an integral part of the offering. It is key in supporting and re-engaging with those learners most at risk of exclusion, for whom a wholly online learning experience has not been suitable.

Concluding thoughts

I would like to thank all at SOLAS, all the ETBs, other FET providers, and all our other partners and stakeholders for their outstanding work and resilience in keeping the learning flowing and learners supported during another challenging year. But most of all I would like to thank all the learners and apprentices who came through FET in 2022, who showed tremendous dedication and understanding in coping with restrictions and changes to their learning experience, and who engaged with ETBs and ourselves to ensure we could tailor provision and support to adapt to the rapidly evolving circumstances in the best way possible.

The continuing prevalence of Covid-19 constrains and impacts on FET's ability to operate effectively and fully support our learners.

Despite this return, and the expanded access to online FET noted above, another immensely challenging year means that overall FET learner numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels. The priority for 2020 and beyond will be to 'reset' to 2019 levels and continue a growth trajectory that will reinforce the enhanced profile and contribution of FET and apprenticeship in meeting the current and rapidly evolving needs of our economy and society.

The platform is there for a really exciting 2022, where new three-year strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and the 16 ETBs will further embed the delivery of Transforming Learning; the development of the FET College of the Future vision will be underpinned by new approaches to capital and recurrent funding; and the commitment to a more integrated tertiary education system will be reflected in a reformed apprenticeship system and a major focus on pathways into and between FET and higher education.

The FET to HE Pathway: A Tale of Two Certifications

Towards equity of competition for year 1 places in higher education

This article looks at the key issues to be addressed in achieving the strategic goal of simplifying the pathway from further education and training to higher education (HE). In particular, it compares the two State certification systems as the current pathways to HE, and examines the advantageous position of the Leaving Certificate over the QQI system in its historical and contemporary contexts. It concludes by outlining a possible scenario for an integrated and equitable CAO points system.

Introduction

The Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) identifies creating pathways as one of the three strategic priorities for the FET sector in Ireland. One such pathway is that from FET to higher education (HE). As identified in the National Access Plan for Higher Education (DES, 2015), 'holders of further education qualifications' are an under-represented group in HE.

This article will focus on some key issues involved in achieving the strategic goal of simplifying this pathway and making it more equitable. The FET to HE issue is also about removing the systemic, administrative, and procedural barriers to fully opening this pathway. The Consultation Paper on the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (DFHERIS, 2021, p. 2) states:

It is essential that pathways to higher education are available to all those seeking to upskill or further their personal development through higher education.

Two State certification systems provide pathways to HE: the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Yet while both are State-owned, the Leaving Certificate (LC) or SEC pathway is more valued and more advantageous than that provided by QQI.

If the ultimate goal is for all students to have an equal chance of a place in HE, then one pathway cannot be seen as more advantageous than another. If the FET route is to be seen as a viable option, and the value of FET is to be improved in Irish society, then the structural barriers causing this inequity must be addressed. Whether these barriers remain in place or are removed is a matter for the key decision-makers in this space.



Dr Rory O'Sullivan
Chair of FET Colleges
Ireland

Regarding the impact of institutional structures, Busemeyer (2015, p. 2) writes:

*... variations in the institutional setup of the education and training systems **do** have enormous consequences for the distribution of skills, income, and wealth in the political economy at large. [emphasis in the original]*

This article will focus on the process of applying for a first-year place in HE from a FET course certified by QQI and compare it to the experience of taking the academic Leaving Cert route. It will identify the main structural barriers and outline a possible way forward. It will begin by outlining the origins of the bias for academic over vocational, with particular reference to Ireland.

Academic vs vocational: History of bias

Over the last 30 years, since the emergence of FET to HE pathways as the subject of debate, the slow progress in accepting vocational qualifications as a legitimate pathway to HE has echoes of Ireland's historical bias towards the academic over the vocational. This differentiation is not unique to Ireland and can be traced back to the time of Aristotle. His distinction is sociological, with academic or liberal knowledge being viewed as more appropriate to the more powerful or wealthy in society:

The system of education ... depends on the way in which rulers and ruled are distinguished from each other. (Aristotle, tr. Barker, 1995, pp. 282–283)

He makes the distinction between subjects who are fit for the freeman and those who are only fit for the slaves. Thus, the valuing of academic knowledge over vocational was based on social class and has no basis in education. Dewey (1916, p. 168) argues that the dichotomy is a fallacy and ultimately damaging:

No one is just an artist and nothing else, and in so far as one approximates that condition, he is so much the less developed human being; he is a monstrosity.

Whitehead (1932) expresses a similar view, arguing that there is no technical education that is not liberal, and no liberal education that is not technical. Deane (2005, p. 289) describes the distinction between education and training as 'artificial'.

Yet the bias in favour of the academic persists. In Ireland, this manifested clearly in the treatment of vocational qualifications as lesser than the Leaving Cert since the foundation of the State. It was evident in Irish government policy with the establishment of the vocational schools under the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in 1930.

Due to the Catholic Church's strong opposition to the VECs at the time, and with State acquiescence, if not collusion, students attending vocational

“ The slow progress in accepting vocational qualifications as a legitimate pathway to HE has echoes of Ireland's historical bias towards the academic over the vocational.

“ In the mid-1990s in Europe, the distinction between the academic and vocational was entirely removed with the emergence of lifelong learning policies.

schools were prohibited from sitting the Intermediate or Leaving Cert exams. These exams were seen as the preserve of the religious secondary schools, which were predominantly fee-paying before the advent of free post-primary education in 1967. In other words, the children of more affluent social classes went to the secondary schools, while the children of lower socio-economic groups went to the vocational schools.

It took the State 17 years, after the formation of the vocational schools, to implement a State certification system for vocational education. The Day Vocational Certificate, or Group Certificate as it was more commonly known, was established in 1947. It was, in effect, an educational cul-de-sac, with no progression route to further study permitted upon completion.

Thus began the official recognition by the State, and consequently Irish society, of the State's vocational system as lesser than the Church-owned secondary school system. The Group Cert's cul-de-sac status continued until the early 1960s, when it was accepted for entry into apprenticeship. Contemporary discussion of the FET-to-HE pathway must be placed in the historical context of this long-standing bias, both societal and structural, for academic certification over vocational.

Since the 1960s, the distinction between the academic and vocational, or education and training, has become less clear, particularly with the emergence of human capital theory. In a previous work (O'Sullivan, 2018a) I identify clear patterns of convergence between education and training in Irish national policy over this period, in response to the policy trajectories of supranational bodies such as the OECD and European Economic Community (EEC), later the European Union (EU). I show how education and training, in the context of economic development and skills policy documents, were increasingly referred to as a single entity.

In 1985, the European Court of Justice, in the landmark Gravier judgment, concluded that in European Law:

... any form of education which prepares for a qualification for a particular profession, trade or employment or which provides the necessary training and skills for such a profession, trade or employment is vocational training, whatever the age and the level of training of the pupils or students, and even if the training programme includes an element of general education. (Case 293/83, paragraph 30)

Therefore, in order to work in any of the professions, such as medicine, accountancy, engineering, or law, students follow a course of vocational training. In the mid-1990s in Europe, the distinction between the academic and vocational was entirely removed with the emergence of lifelong learning policies.

The FET-to-HE debate in Ireland

In Ireland, the debate about the design of a new qualification system in general, and the FET-to-HE pathway in particular, began in earnest in the early 1990s. It coincided with the emergence internationally of qualifications

frameworks, and how such frameworks could provide the infrastructure for access, transfer, and progression, namely pathways.

In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established as the first State certification body for the nascent further education sector. By 1992, City of Dublin VEC (CDVEC) and Dublin Institute of Technology piloted the Points Enhancement Scheme. This involved the NCVA grades achieved by students on individual modules on CDVEC post-Leaving Cert courses attracting additional CAO points – in other words, a Leaving-Cert-result-plus-NCVA-result approach.

In 1998, NCVA established the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs), which facilitated the development of a national FET to HE pathway between the FE schools and colleges and primarily the institutes of technology (IoTs). The universities became involved some years later. The HELs scheme was based on the NCVA-result-only approach. This saw pathways developed with some IoT and university courses, but not all.

The debate in the 1990s culminated in the passing of a landmark piece of legislation, the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act. It established for the first time in Ireland a national qualifications system consisting of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA), the Higher Education and Training Council (HETAC), and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). It also led to the launch in 2003 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in Ireland, a milestone in the pathways debate.

“ The 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act established for the first time in Ireland a national qualifications system.

Based on the principle of all learning being equally valued, this 10-level framework placed FET qualifications alongside HE qualifications using the same language of learning outcomes. A core value of the NFQ is that it must contribute to building an inclusive society that ‘offers equal opportunities throughout life to all people for access to quality learning opportunities’ (NQA, 2003, p. 11).

The 2012, the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) following the amalgamation of NQA, HETAC, FETAC, and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). This Act (section 2(5)(a)) defines access to a programme as:

Access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired.

By this definition, all learning is of equal value. However, for admission to higher education through the CAO, the Leaving Cert, from one State certification system, is more valued in this process by higher education institutions (HEIs) than the QQI awards, from the other system. In many HEIs, QQI awards are not valued at all, with no FET pathway from many courses listed on the CAO.

This situation is improving: currently over 88% of HE courses on the CAO have a QQI link through the HELs (www.careersportal.ie), compared to 100% for the Leaving Cert. But in terms of the existence of pathways, the

LC remains the more advantageous route for students seeking admission to HE. Rather than history repeating itself, history has continued.

Learner pathways: Towards an equal chance of success for all

If the two qualifications are analysed through the lens of ‘will prepare the student for third-level study’, both the Leaving Cert and the QQI level 5 award have many positives. Indeed, recent data published by SOLAS (2020) shows that students in the lower CAO points bracket are 17% more likely to complete a HE course if they chose the FET route rather than progressing to HE directly.

“ The situation is improving: currently over 88% of HE courses are on the CAO.

Much of the difficulty in progressing this issue has been based on a lack of information and, to some extent, the persistence of historical perceptions of vocational education. The higher value afforded to the Leaving Cert over the QQI as the predominant pathway to HE is so ingrained as to be accepted as an unchallenged truth. It is this fundamental assumption that must be challenged before true equity of access to HE can be achieved.

President John F. Kennedy, in seeking to challenge such assumptions and modernise the US approach to public policy, said in his commencement address at Yale University in June 1962:

Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

In essence, what is required is a shift in the value that society places on different types of learning. A prerequisite of this cultural change is structural change. If we are seeking to ‘better facilitate access, progression and success for a wider and more diverse learner population at all levels’ (DFHERIS, 2021, p. 11), and aiming to increase the number of school leavers choosing FET options, then the advantage of the Leaving Cert over QQI in access to HE must be removed.

The ultimate goal must be that, regardless of which State certification system is availed of, all applicants should have an equal chance of receiving an offer from the CAO.

Current FET pathways to higher education

Currently, the HELs scheme has two primary FET-to-HE pathways: a quota-based system for universities, and a points-based system for technological universities and IoTs, with a maximum of 390 out of 600 CAO points applying (see Figure 1). Processing of applications for HE has two stages, administrative and competitive, described below.

Processing applications: Administrative and competitive phases

Administrative phase

The first phase of the application, regardless of pathway, is to ensure that the applicant has the required academic standard and subjects. For applicants from the Leaving Cert pathway, the academic standard across virtually all HEIs is a pass in six subjects, including at least two H5 grades (www.nui.ie). A few courses require specific subjects.

For applicants from the QQI pathway, the administrative phase is far less straightforward. As we have seen, not all courses on the CAO pathway have a QQI pathway. For those with a pathway, the academic standard required by HEIs varies between three and five distinction grades. But the range of subject requirements (which varies between HEIs) and different courses is extensive. For there to be equity of access to HE, there must first be a QQI pathway into every course in the CAO, and consistency in the requirements in the administrative phase of admissions.

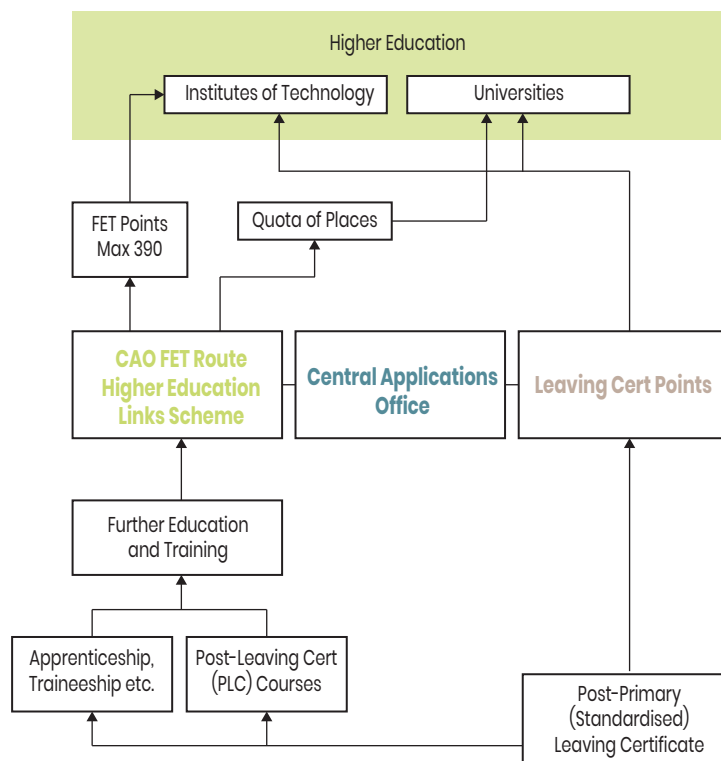


Figure 1: Progression to higher education (year 1) – current system (FETCI, 2021, p. 27)

HEAR and DARE

A particular distinction between the two pathways is with the access schemes HEAR and DARE. These are currently available only for students from the Leaving Cert pathway. However, many students with disability or special education needs choose FET after completing the Leaving Cert. If they aspire to progress to HE from FET, which may be the most educationally appropriate pathway for some, they cannot avail of supports equivalent to the DARE scheme.

Similarly, students who could have availed of the HEAR scheme from the Leaving Cert pathway have no equivalent supports available in the QQI pathway. This situation is inconsistent with equity of access to higher education.

Competitive phase

The second phase of the admissions process is the competitive phase.

This is required when the number of applications that have successfully completed the administrative phase exceeds the number of places available. Which students are offered a place?

“Students who could have availed of the HEAR scheme from the Leaving Cert pathway have no equivalent supports available in the QQI pathway.”

For the Leaving Cert pathway, the CAO points calculation applies. For the QQI pathway, the competitive phase involves two further processes. For the universities, a quota system applies, with each university deciding how many places are to be ring-fenced for FET graduates. Since this is decided each year, the number can increase or decrease.

So the actual number of places available is largely unknown, which presents an information deficit for students on the QQI pathway.

The availability of quotas guarantees that places are ring-fenced for certain under-represented groups and is a common tool in the widening participating agenda. But if participation levels reach a stage where the presence of a quota is restricting rather than widening participation, its continuation must be reviewed. In other words, at what level of participation does an under-represented group no longer need special designation? Could quotas be considered an important but short-term tool in the initial stages of opening pathways?

The technological higher education sector (THES) uses a points system with a maximum of 390 points. Below is an explanation of this calculation from the QQI website (www.qqi.ie):

Each level 5 and level 6 component is scored:

- 3.25 for a Distinction
- 2.16 for a Merit
- 1.08 for a Pass

This number is then multiplied by the individual component credit value to a maximum of 120 credits (a total of 390 points).

It may be easiest to multiply the individual component credit value by 3 for Distinction, 2 for Merit, and 1 for Pass, multiplying by 13 and dividing by 12.

Clearly, a system that resorts to two decimal places compares less favourably to the Leaving Cert points calculation. With this calculation, two level 5 qualifications on the NFQ, the Leaving Cert, and the QQI level 5 award for a FET course are valued differently by over 200 CAO points!

As providers of QQI certification, the THES has placed a lower numerical value on the QQI pathway than on the Leaving Cert pathway. The rationale for this is unclear. This is inconsistent with equity of access to HE. Indeed, the grade inflation that occurred following the 2020 and 2021 Leaving Cert results led to a corresponding increase in the CAO points requirement for many courses.

The current system is complex and lacking in transparency.

For FET graduates, many courses in the THES sector that they would normally have expected to progress experienced an increase in the CAO points requirement above the 390 ceiling. This resulted in a double inequity for FET graduates. In 2021, for the THES, while 928 of the 967 courses had QQI links, only 797 required 390 points and below (www.careersportal.ie). Assuming that a QQI-linked course would normally be in the 390-points-and-below range, the grade – and subsequent points inflation – excluded 131 courses because the points required went above 390. This represents over 14% of the courses with a QQI pathway. This, too, is clearly not consistent with equity of access to HE.

Towards equitable pathways from FET to HE

The current system is complex and lacking in transparency. FET professionals find it difficult to navigate. What must it be like for students? The Transitions Working Paper on FET to HE progression (DES, 2020) made recommendations on this issue, including the consideration of ‘a holistic and integrated FET recognition system within the mainstream CAO application system’ (p. 25). This recommendation, and how the two systems might be benchmarked, was reiterated in the FET Strategy (SOLAS, 2020).

Figure 2 shows a representation of such an integrated system. The following discussion outlines a possible scenario for a ‘holistic and integrated CAO application system’.

In this scenario, the first step towards an integrated system would be to align the grading structures of the two certification systems. The LC grading is based on bands of 10%: H1 = 90–100%, H2 = 80 < 90%, etc. In the QQI grading, Distinction = 80–100%, Merit = 65–79%, and Pass = 50–64%. One possible adjustment would be to revise the QQI grading into 10% bands:

Distinction 1 (D1):	90 – 100%
Distinction 2 (D2):	80 < 90%
Merit 1 (M1):	70 < 80%
Merit 2 (M2):	60 < 70%
Pass (P):	50 < 60%

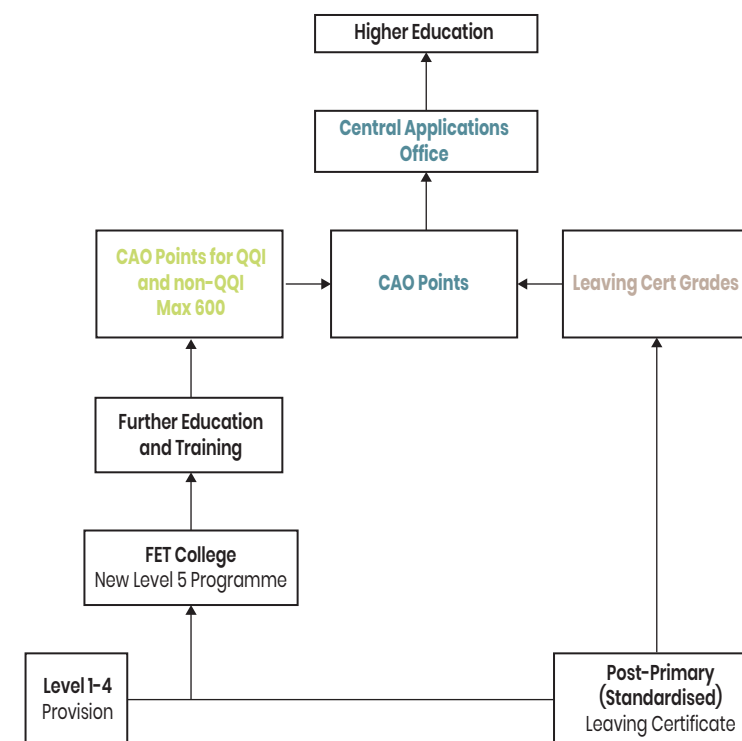


Figure 2: Progression to higher education (year 1) – future system (FETCI, 2021, p. 28)

Having aligned the grading structures, the next task would be to assign CAO points. Currently, not including any bonus points, for the SEC pathway, CAO points are based on the best six LC grades to a maximum of 600 points. That is, each H1 grade is assigned 100 points. H2 is assigned 88 points (or 88% of the H1 points), H3 is assigned 77 points (or 77% of the H1 points), and so on.

With the QQI pathway, to achieve a full level 5 award requires passing eight modules. A complicating factor is that, while most QQI modules attract 15 credits, some attract a different number. For the purpose of this exercise, we'll assume that all QQI modules have 15 credits.

In an equitable system, the full level 5 award would attract 600 points, the same maximum as the LC. Thus, each of the eight modules would attract a maximum of 75 CAO points. In other words, a D1 would be assigned 75 points. In line with the proportional differences in LC points, a D2 would attract 66 points; an M1, 58 points, and so on. Table 1 outlines this integrated points system.

Leaving Cert higher level grade	Points	QQI level grade	Points
H1 (90–100%)	100	D1 (90–100%)	75
H2 (80 < 90%)	88	D2 (80 < 90%)	66
H3 (70 < 80%)	77	M1 (70 < 80%)	58
H4 (60 < 70%)	66	M2 (60 < 70%)	50
H5 (50 < 60%)	56	P (50 < 60%)	42
H6 (40 < 50%)	46	U (0 < 50%)	0
H7 (30 < 40%)	37		
H8 (0 < 30%)	0		

Table 1: Possible integrated CAO points system (O'Sullivan, 2018b)

This simpler and more streamlined system would be a significant move towards equity of access to higher education. It would also reduce administrative costs. The current complex HELS system is administratively cumbersome and therefore more expensive. If the system is designed to be equitable, or universally designed, then the corresponding cost of administering it is also reduced.

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An Inclusive Approach for an Inclusive Strategy

The role of ETB FET services in Adult Literacy for Life



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Adult Literacy for Life, the new 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, envisages a whole-of-society approach to ensuring that adults in Ireland have the literacy skills they need to function in an inclusive and equitable economy and society. ETB FET services have the experience and expertise to play a leading role in implementing these objectives.

Introduction

The world of work is changing rapidly. Anticipating and planning for new occupations and skills needs is challenging. What is certain is that people need a broad range of skills and competences that will enable them to function effectively. This is true not only in working life but in society as a whole, helping to connect people's experiences, motivations, and aspirations both personally and as active members of their communities. This need is particularly relevant in the aftermath of the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Adult Literacy for Life (ALL), the 10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, was launched by Minister Harris on 8 September 2021, honouring a commitment outlined in Our Shared Future, the 2019 Programme for Government. Its stated vision is 'an Ireland where every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society to reach their full potential' (SOLAS, 2021, p. 33).

Many strategies and programmes are already in place across government to support adults to develop and improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. What is new here is that the ALL strategy envisages a whole-of-society approach – government, economy, and community – to implementing its objectives. It recognises that the provision of existing supports across the various organisations and departments is often highly fragmented and uncoordinated.

Additional opportunities and clear progression pathways need to be made available, and the structural inequalities that cause literacy difficulties and hinder access to solutions need to be addressed. The ALL strategy argues that the proposed integrated and collaborative approach will require a strategic response at national, regional, and local levels, similarly to the Healthy Ireland Strategic Plan 2021–2025 and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2021–2025, and that it can be informed by international initiatives.

Key recommendations of Adult Literacy for Life

The ALL strategy ‘aims to equip all adults with the literacy skills they need’ and is ‘a key step in achieving Ireland’s goal of a fully inclusive and equitable society and economy (SOLAS, 2021, p. 7). It outlines the existing supports and proposes a joined-up, systems-based approach – across education, health, local government, employers, and community – to addressing barriers, connecting these supports, and making them accessible to those in need. It also recognises the need to expand the supports to meet emerging needs, and it envisages that the result will be citizens, an economy, and communities that can meet the work and life challenges that lie ahead.

Implementation of the ALL strategy will be steered by a cross-government implementation committee, chaired by the Minister and supported by a central, department-led Programme Office (and Collaboration Fund). This in turn will coordinate a multi-stakeholder National Literacy Coalition. At regional level, it is proposed that Regional Literacy Coalitions, supported by Regional Literacy Coordinators, will be established under the auspices of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Regional Coalitions will be the link to local partnership responses and to national and government structures and objectives.

Current role of ETB FET services in literacy services

ETB Further Education and Training (FET) services are the largest providers of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills services and supports for adults in Ireland, with a statutory responsibility to fulfil this role. They provide a wide range of specialised non-accredited and accredited functional literacy programmes (L1–L4 in the National Framework of Qualifications), including family learning and prison education, to an average of 25,000 learners annually in ETB centres and community settings.

“ETB Further Education and Training (FET) services are the largest providers of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills services and supports for adults in Ireland.”

The courses use real-life content, often provided by the learners themselves, to show the necessity and value of the skills gained to people’s lives and work. Classes are small, tailored to individual needs, and delivered using approaches aimed at promoting self-confidence and continued engagement and enjoyment of learning.

Additional supports help learners to engage meaningfully with their learning, with wrap-around services such as guidance, counselling, and access to digital devices offered alongside teaching. Addressing barriers such as the digital divide and providing appropriate learner support will continue to be essential as the FET sector expands and develops further through the implementation of the ALL strategy.

Literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development are increasingly integrated into higher-level FET training programmes such as apprenticeships, traineeships, and other employment-focused courses. Outcomes from ETB evaluations on apprenticeship courses that provided additional literacy and numeracy support show increased confidence, more propensity to learn, and improved problem-solving skills among participants, as well as achievement of higher grades.

ETBs also have the expertise and resources to provide a coordinated response to the need for developing the transversal skills of those already in employment, through a range of integrated supports. Literacy and digital skills initiatives such as Explore and Skills for Work can work well in conjunction with, or as progression to, more advanced employee development programmes such as Skills to Advance. As a local example, Donegal ETB provided basic training in digital skills to staff at an engineering firm in Killybegs in advance of their pursuing online training in supervisory management.

Other important examples of ETB transversal-skills support are Irish courses for native speakers who wish to improve their literacy skills, and English-language and intercultural courses for migrants, including refugee resettlement and Direct Provision programmes. These are provided to an average of 12,000 learners annually.

ETB FET staff are involved in all relevant education networks in the country and have a long history of working in partnership at local, regional, and national levels to develop and deliver relevant services to adult learners, particularly those who have experienced educational disadvantage. Staff are highly trained and experienced professionals who provide not just teaching and curriculum development and review but also quality assurance, literacy awareness training, recognition of prior learning (RPL), referral and signposting services, and other related expertise to community groups, government departments, and agencies on request.

“Donegal ETB provided basic training in digital skills to staff at an engineering firm in Killybegs in advance of their pursuing online training in supervisory management.”

In 2020 and 2021, extraordinary demands were placed on ETB FET staff by the Covid-19 pandemic. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), in its research on the impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning, and assessment in FET, found that FET learners ‘consistently commended the availability and responsiveness of teaching staff, the lengths to which practitioners went to keep learners engaged in their learning, and the level of support and flexibility they received’ (QQI, 2020, p. 59).

Expanded role for ETBs in implementing the ALL strategy

If ETB FET services have statutory responsibility for the above and are already doing it all, it is reasonable to ask why so many people in Ireland still struggle to address their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills deficits. (We might also ask why these deficits exist in the first place.) The ALL strategy outlines some of the issues: structural barriers to access, insufficient opportunities that are uncoordinated across a plethora of organisations, and unclear progression pathways for learners. ETBs will not disagree with this assessment.

For ETBs to carry out their expanded role in implementing the strategy, they require a two-pronged approach:

1. Development and expansion of existing services

Some existing services being provided by ETBs are long-standing and have been developed over many years, such as the provision of functional literacy programmes. Others are more recent, for example the integration of literacy supports into higher-level course curricula, and digital skills supports for those in employment. Services may traditionally have developed in an ad hoc manner, but today a more strategic approach to the development and expansion of structures is in place.

Adult Literacy for Life offers further opportunities to reimagine the roles of literacy, numeracy, digital skills, and language provision in FET services, including in curriculum and progression-pathways development, learner support, and technology-enhanced and blended learning. This will support ETBs to plan systematically and strategically for the full participation of learners, and will help them support other stakeholders and community partners in realising the strategy's objectives. These opportunities will also take full advantage of the immense potential of digital technologies, which are vital to the successful delivery of the strategy's objectives of facilitating learning in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

2. Key role of ETBs

The ALL strategy has confirmed the key role of ETBs in its successful implementation, including coordinating and staffing the Regional Coalitions. As key players in the provision of literacy services, and as experienced partners in the relevant local, regional, and national structures, ETBs are best placed to perform this function. Meeting literacy demands in the context of Ireland's Sustainable Development Agenda, the European Commission's priorities (including the European Green Deal and the 2030 Digital Compass), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Social Charter will all require new and flexible strategies at regional and local levels.

“The ALL strategy has confirmed the key role of ETBs in its successful implementation, including coordinating and staffing the Regional Coalitions.”

As well as the Regional Coordinator posts, additional resources may be required as a result of the development of action plans by the various partners in the Regional Coalitions. The support and expertise of colleagues in ETBs will inform and guide Coalition partners who may not be as experienced in directly meeting the needs of learners who have new or existing challenges in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills development.

Conclusion

ETBs have a long history in developing and delivering literacy services in Ireland and in working collaboratively and effectively with partners in local, regional, and national fora. They are exceptionally well positioned to play a central role in implementing the timely Adult Literacy for Life strategy, which aims to ensure that citizens are prepared for meeting the challenges of living, working, and thriving in the 21st-century world.

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Leaving No One Behind

Speaking at a digital inclusion webinar hosted by An Cosán in October 2021, CEO Heydi Foster stressed the need for collaboration between community, state, and corporate sectors to ensure that every adult in Ireland has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills to engage fully in society.

“We need a whole of society approach to a whole of society problem. Digital literacy is fast becoming an essential requirement for life, work and learning. Without digital literacy, citizens cannot participate fully in society, or acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the twenty-first century.”

Ms Foster continued:

“Almost one in two adults in Ireland has low digital literacy levels, according to the Digital Economic and Society Index 2018. This is something that we all have a responsibility to address as a matter of urgency.

“A collaboration between community, state and corporate sectors is urgently needed to ensure every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital skills to fully engage in society. Let's all commit to working together to help those we support realise their full potential.”

“Founded 35 years ago in West Tallaght with a mission to eradicate poverty by empowering people through education, the aim of An Cosán has always been to leave no one behind by reaching out to the furthest behind first.”



Heydi Foster, CEO of An Cosán, Ireland's largest provider of community education.

This article explores the need to develop the existing QQI level 5 curriculum for Post-Leaving Certificate students seeking to progress to higher education. It assesses the current progression policies and initiatives, and it reviews the latest data, to reconsider the suitability of the *Work Experience* module. It concludes by recommending that a new module be developed.

Introduction

This article explores the need to develop the existing QQI level 5 curriculum for Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students seeking to progress to higher education (HE). It appraises the progression policies and initiatives currently in place to increase the number of learners progressing to HE, underpinned by a review of the data. It examines the significance of the *Work Experience* module for PLC students entering the workplace by assessing the core curriculum in the programme, outlining a historic timeline of the development of the module and presenting contemporary ideologies in the FET sector for its future development.

This review reconsiders the relevance of the *Work Experience* (WE) module for learners progressing to HE. It explores an alternative WE module, *Personal & Professional Development* (PPD), to examine its effectiveness in preparing students for this trajectory.

Many 'pre-university' courses at colleges of further education offer PPD rather than WE, and this represents what is happening on the ground. The marketing and delivery of such courses – without a supporting and corresponding curriculum grounded in the excellence that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) strives towards – shows the need to review mandatory modules for learners seeking to progress to HE. The article concludes with recommendations to devise and develop a new module.

Overview of the PLC sector

The number of students enrolled in further education and training (FET) in Ireland is estimated at over 200,000 (SOLAS, 2020b). This figure accounts for all enrolled students in a diverse range of education provisions across levels 1 to 6 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), including Youthreach, PLC courses, the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS), apprenticeships, and others. The largest student intake in FET is in PLC provision (McGuinness et

One Size Fits All

Reconsidering the mandatory status of *Work Experience* in QQI level 5 awards for further education students on a trajectory to higher education



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al., 2019), with enrolment figures from 2018 estimated at 28,000 (Guerin and Hegarty, 2020).

A caveat applies to these figures: the most recent data available is at least two years old. SOLAS gathers PLC data in the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), but a real-time database of progression from PLC to HE remains absent. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) recently introduced the Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD), which cross-references data from PLSS with other public sector databases.

Inadequate database systems in British education repeatedly fail to inform strategic planning, student supports, and curriculum delivery (Jameson et al., 2017). This lacuna is replicated in Ireland: a report for SOLAS by Guerin and Hegarty (2020, p. 28) states unobtrusively, in a footnote, that graduation rates for PLC students from HE was 'not available at the time of writing'. McGuinness et al. (2019) note the need for a unified administrative educational database for Ireland, which would collate data from the 'four pillars' of the Irish education system and be modelled on examples of best international practice, such as the Dutch, German, or Australian systems.

Progression initiatives

A number of excellent initiatives to support the progression of FET learners into HE have been used in recent years. The FET2HE network aims to support a goal from the National Access Plan (2015) to increase this progression from 6.6% to 10% by 2020 (Ryan, 2018). FET2HE initially consisted of seven of the sixteen Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and four higher education institutions (HEIs), but it is paramount that all educational stakeholders be represented in order to achieve a national and consistent approach that removes unintentional bias to students from the other nine ETBs.

Individual HEIs have also introduced strategic measures to increase the number of FET applicants to degree programmes. Examples include the Higher Education Link Scheme, memoranda of understanding between institutes of technology and colleges of further education, and the introduction of QQI/FETAC student recruitment advisors in Irish universities.

The number of course places reserved for FET learners at NUI Galway recently increased from 60 to over 220 (NUI Galway, 2021). This extraordinary increase shows the considerable value the university places on progression and the widening of participation among learners accessing HE from different educational backgrounds.

Such an investment of resources may also reflect the retention and completion success rates of FET students in degree programmes. Although the claim of strong retention rates for such students has been regarded as hearsay, recent data analysis confirms a high rate of retention (around 70%) in this cohort (Mulvey, 2019; Guerin and Hegarty, 2020; SOLAS, 2020a).

Progression statistics

Over the last two decades, the increase in FET applications to the CAO for HE courses reflects a seismic change in the destination of these students

to HE rather than entering the workplace. Figure 1 shows the rise of CAO applications from students with an FET FETAC/QQI award, from just under 3,000 in 2001 to over 14,000 in 2018.

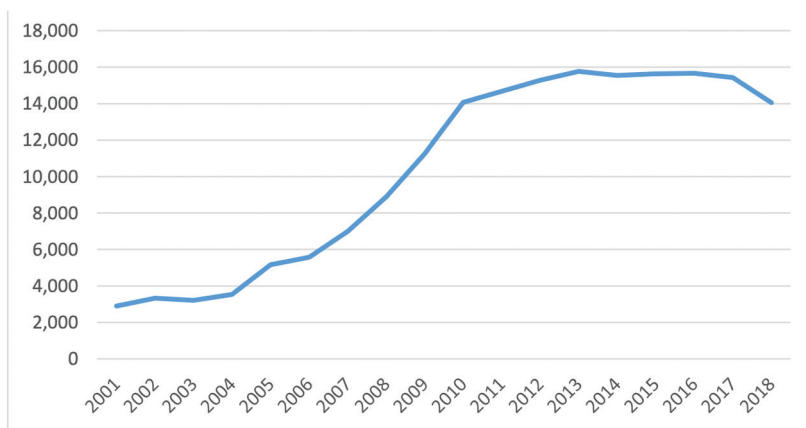


Figure 1: CAO applications from the FET sector for HE courses (DES, 2020, p. 15)

The new access and entry measures for FET learners applying to HE through the CAO, as outlined in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Statement of Strategy 2021–2023 (DFHERIS, 2021), is the latest initiative to provide FET learners with new pathways to HE. The strategy also introduces an application process to FE courses at levels 5 and 6 for those applying with Leaving Certificate results, which aims to alert these applicants to the vast range of FE and apprenticeship options as well as HE (O'Connor, 2021).

Supporting progression in the curriculum

The emphasis and importance placed on preparing PLC students to enter the workplace can be traced back to the formation of the NCVA level 2 awards, which was retained by FETAC and is now under QQI's remit (Mulvey, 2019). The original NCVA *Work Experience* module remains remarkably recognisable from its initial conception to the programme delivered currently, and it continues to function as a core mandatory module in the QQI level 5 awards.

The recent SOLAS document *Future FET: Transforming Learning* (2020a) and an article by O'Sullivan (2020) re-evaluate the WE module and propose giving it further prominence by increasing the credit level from 12.5% to 30%. For FET learners en route to the workplace, the delivery on key skills in the work arena can only be regarded as a positive step. For FET learners en route to HE, however, there is no equivalent 'destination' module or increased credit level reflecting their chosen path. This results in unintended bias in the course structure towards PLC learners pursuing a course to gain immediate employment upon completion.

McGuinness et al. (2019) write that around 70% of PLC learners did work experience during their studies, but they do not offer a narrative as to why. They report that 40% of learners said their main objective in completing a PLC course was to progress to HE, and it is plausible that some of them

completed an alternative module for WE, which is arguably more beneficial to students considering HE.

The PPD module is an approved alternative to WE and can be found in most QQI levels 5 and 6 major awards. The module is well written and comprises seven learning outcomes, the fourth of which is the most salient here: 'Use research skills to gather a range of relevant information and materials for entry to and support within further or higher education or training provision, or within a particular career path'.

While the module recommends that the learner engage with primary research, such as interviews and visits with HE, an assessment structure similar to the WE supervisor's report may benefit the learner more. The references to workplace learning in this module dilute the key focus of progression to HE and point to an urgent need to write new mandatory modules with progression at the heart of their design and content.

“While the branding [pre-university courses] may be considered a strong marketing tool to recruit students who seek an alternative pathway to HE, there is no guarantee of a university place upon completion of the course.”

PLC course names

Irish principals 'view different courses in the college as serving different purposes' (McGuinness, 2019, p. 574), and this is reinforced by the fashionable marketing by colleges of further education for 'pre-university' courses whose titles suggest a predetermined route. Figure 2 shows a sample of pre-university courses advertised by numerous FE centres across Ireland.

While this branding may be considered a strong marketing tool to recruit students who seek an alternative pathway to HE, there is no guarantee of a university place upon completion of the course. None of the FET stakeholders regulate or approve course names, and there is a long-standing practice to change a course title from what is printed on the certificate, for example an 'Art Portfolio Preparation Course' where the award named on the QQI certificate states 'Graphic Design 5M1995'. The disparity is ambiguous.

Examples of adding a prefix such as *pre-* to a subject area can be found in the historical marketing of PLC courses. An article in the *Irish Times* (Byrne, 1996) states, 'most PLCs prepare students for work while others offer pretraining such as pre nursing or pre apprenticeship courses'. It is an open question whether this can reasonably be interpreted as false advertising, since colleges cannot guarantee a place even upon completion of the FET course with the highest results possible.

A review of pre-university courses should question if the curriculum imparts the skills needed to progress to HE and if learners have achieved the desired outcomes in order to proceed to HE courses. The large number of pre-university courses indicates the needs of different learners to avail of alternative routes to HE, but these courses are operating without a considered curriculum focused on the skills that the learners require to fulfil their academic ambitions.

New curriculum proposal

The writing and validation of a new module, to complement the existing progression initiatives outlined above, is under the remit of QQI. This independent state agency regulates the qualification systems within the NFQ and aims to support the distinctive pathways of PLC learners after course completion, focusing 'both on facilitating progression to higher education and on direct generation of employment outcomes' (QQI, 2020, p. 41).

A fundamental differentiation between learners' final destinations is clearly outlined, but the corresponding programme content remains aspirational and unfulfilled. Many QQI award descriptors include references to progression (ibid., p. 50), but the development of a new module that fully embraces QQI's policies for progression must be addressed.

The design and specification of a new module with progression as its *raison d'être* requires consultation with all stakeholders. Engagement with HEIs to elucidate the key skills that would benefit students before beginning a degree programme is a fundamental starting point. The knowledge base of subject-matter experts in FET to develop the content and apply suitable QA assessment instruments, with particular reference to the success of pre-university programmes, is an invaluable resource to be fully exploited in the process.

A dialogue with, or survey of, FET students who have completed level 5 awards and are pursuing HE could offer unique and helpful insights. An understanding of the skills they developed as part of their PLC studies that they have used in their undergraduate studies, as well as others that they developed in HE, could also shed new light.

A structured engagement of FET learners with HE, similar to the supervisor's report in WE, might realise benchmark 7 of the Gatsby Foundation principles, which advocates 'encounters with further and higher education' to widen participation of FET students progressing to HE (Avery, 2020). It is important to evaluate assessment duplication from other mandatory modules, such as *Communications* and *Team Leadership*, while still promoting cross-curricular assessment between vocational and mandatory modules. Key literary and research skills found in *Communications*, such as writing a structured report and critical reading tasks, are timely and should be included in the new module.

Conclusion

The current curriculum in QQI level 5 courses retains a historical bias, which sought to impart skills to FE learners entering the workplace. This article has challenged the myopic perspective that work-related modules should be incorporated into all FET courses and instead advocates reform of the QQI mandatory modules. The alternative module PPD, as outlined above, offers a perfunctory gesture for FE learners on a trajectory to HE. A new mandatory module that focuses exclusively on progression is essential to provide equal educational opportunities to learners on different pathways.

A new mandatory module that focuses exclusively on progression is essential to provide equal educational opportunities to learners on different pathways.

The actions and initiatives taken by SOLAS, the ETBs, FET2HE, and HEIs to promote progression pathways for FET learners are commendable, but it is now time for the curriculum to mirror these advancements. In order for this to be effective, the planning and development of any new curriculum must involve all stakeholders.

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This article explores the concept of wellbeing as an essential contributor to learners' progression in further education and training. It positions learner supports at the heart of the learner experience, drawing on principles of societal and economic reform that are illustrated in learner supports and engagement.

Introduction

The transition to tertiary education can be difficult for many learners, and the personal investment required can take its toll. An essential part of any good education system, therefore, is support for learner wellbeing. Wellbeing is important at every stage of learners' educational progression, and this has been further highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Education is not an end in itself. It benefits learners, contributes to a better society, and is an investment in the country's economic future. It is therefore important to have policies, procedures, and systems in place to underpin and support learner engagement, retention, and progression.

The pandemic abruptly changed the educational landscape for learners. The traditional supports that learners relied upon, involving face-to-face interaction, vanished overnight. Their connections with tutors and teachers were interrupted. The start of the pandemic brought many questions into sharp focus for learners and providers as they transitioned to emergency remote learning, such as access to devices, internet connection, and suitable study areas.

ETBI study

To ascertain the impact of Covid-19 and emergency remote learning on further education and training (FET) ETB learners, Education & Training Boards Ireland carried out a comprehensive study capturing the lived experience of 2,500 full-time and part-time FET learners (ETBI, 2021b). This study is important because it provides not only insights into the lives of learners during lockdown but also valuable information on the effectiveness of ETB responses, which can feed into future policy development.

The study gave a voice to learners, who explained the difficulties they faced during lockdown in their own words. These included developing competencies in planning work, focusing on

Putting Wellbeing at the Centre of the Learner Experience

Looking forward as we progress in our educational landscape



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Historically, the FET sector has always had a learner-centred approach.

coursework, self-motivation, and maintaining a study/life balance, all against a backdrop of losing out on interaction with other learners and the isolation of learning alone.

Some learners highlighted the advantages of remote online learning:

I was able to work on my course at my own pace and had some choice in the times I did the work.

Others missed the interaction:

It's not the same when you are not in class. I learn more from other people face to face.

Historically, the FET sector has always had a learner-centred approach. This continued to be a key feature of the sector's response to the pandemic. ETBs and FET sector staff showed great dedication and agility during the pandemic and showed their ability to reach out and support the most vulnerable members of their communities.

They adapted to the new normal by switching to video communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and they used many other methods, such as telephone and email, when requested by the learner. These approaches allowed for the continuity of teaching and learning support and were welcomed by the vast majority of learners.

The study found that most learners (92%) were satisfied with access to the platforms, resources, and support and with the accessibility facilitated by ETB tutors and trainers during this period. Many said their sense of belonging was diminished and felt keenly the loss of social interaction with teachers, tutors, and other learners.

Maintaining staff wellbeing is a prerequisite to ensuring learner wellbeing. To support ETB staff, ETBI has hosted webinars focusing on supporting staff wellbeing through a crisis. Participants were given an opportunity to reflect on how we experience and respond to crises and were given tools to help emotional regulation. As Robert Glazer wrote (see Glazer, 2019, 2020):

If we don't put ourselves first, then everyone we come across tends to get a suboptimal version of us. To be at our best – for ourselves and others – we need to make sure we are living in a way that leaves us happy, healthy, and rested.

Lessons learned

Looking at the lessons learned during the pandemic, what is required to successfully transition from in-person to online learning? What skills will FET learners need in order to benefit fully from on-site as well as online domains in the future? How can we enhance learners' wellbeing by bringing a sense of belonging and supporting the skills required to maintain engagement, to keep an open mind and a willingness to learn?

Further education and training continues to evolve, and it is important that learner supports remain at the heart of this transformation. Positioning learners at the centre will allow them to become partners, fully engaged stakeholders whose voice is heard and acted upon. When learners take a central role, it becomes an empowering tool for them, where learning is not a passive activity but rather a process guided and fully supported by them.

Coherent learner-centred support structures have been identified as a key feature in the Vision for Tertiary Education (ETBI, 2021c), the position paper published by the directors of the Further Education and Training Forum. This paper identified the need for a centralised framework of support services to underpin FET provision, improve learner engagement, and provide a holistic approach to learner supports.

“When learners take a central role, it becomes an empowering tool for them, where learning is not a passive activity.”

The post-pandemic period, with the return to on-site learning, should be used as an opportunity to develop a new approach to learner engagement: How can we maximise engagement and support face-to-face interaction by engaging with learners through digital platforms in a meaningful way?

The survey yielded insights into the supports available to the learners, the supports most commonly used, and those most effective in helping learners adjust to the new learning environment. Hence, there is an opportunity to further improve learner support services by expanding those that learners found especially useful. Supports that helped learners feel more positively about their experience included:

- *ICT Device Scheme*: a government initiative to lend devices to students in exceptional financial need. Simply having a device was a lifeline for many learners: ‘receiving a device from the centre was a game-changer,’ said one respondent.
- *1-2-1 Literacy, Numeracy, and Language Support* were particularly appreciated by two vulnerable groups: those for whom English is a second language and those whose literacy and numeracy skills are not so well developed.
- *Library*: ETBI is continuing to enhance a digital library for the FET sector that is a central one-stop shop for guides, tutorials, and resource access. The library also houses a health and wellbeing section for both learners and staff.

Learner wellbeing is not a stand-alone issue that can be looked at in isolation. It is influenced by many strands underlying learner engagement, such as accessibility, teaching practice, communications, flexibility, and supports. The research shows that the absence of supports – including easy access to online learning platforms and resources – negatively affected learners’ experience and wellbeing. The findings make it clear that learners have certain expectations of their courses, and that if these are not met, then wellbeing can be affected.

One of the key issues identified by the learners in the study was the sense of belonging, and how the move to emergency remote learning had negatively impacted on their feeling of being connected. The further education and training sector prides itself on providing a sense of community. Small class sizes and strong engagement give learners a feeling of being part of a supporting collective and community of FET learners.

What comes next

To support the FET community, ETBI has organised a schedule of events, seminars, and webinars that will aim among other things to support the health and wellbeing of staff and learners. The first webinar in this series will explore anxiety among FET learners and staff embarking on an academic course, coupled with returning to centres in person, and will provide strategies and techniques to tackle this.

The seminars will provide insights into the nature of change and the inherent disorientation that it brings. It will outline valuable strategies to support the sector by enabling learners to navigate their journeys throughout the demands of an academic year. These initiatives all contribute to supporting the learner experience and therefore learner wellbeing.

These are interesting times. The response to the pandemic, the FET College of the Future vision (ETBI, 2021a), and the ongoing work of the ETB sector all culminate in a fantastic opportunity to place learner wellbeing at the centre of the learner experience.

The developmental trajectories of the FET learner and sector are hugely dependent on wellbeing in its meaningful integration in learning and teaching. Societal and global crises, while presenting barriers to education worldwide, teach us to engage the learner voice to inform an FET system that fosters support and innovation throughout the FET tertiary experience for learners and communities.

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As an EU Member State, Ireland informs and is informed by decisions, agreements, policies, and priorities identified at EU level. Understanding how these agendas and decisions influence national priorities and planning can support the development of quality and the delivery of practice.

Introduction

Most of us, by now, are well aware of the impact of Brexit on our lives, the economy, and Northern Ireland. But are we clear on what we need to know about European policies, and why they are relevant to our education and training sector and to guidance service developments?

In the post-Brexit world of education, why is it important to understand and be aware of EU Commission policies and strategic objectives, and the importance of the European Union (EU) agenda of mobility as a crucial option for Irish students and education and training management and staff? Are we aware of how EU policies are directly affecting the work that we do?

There may be some misunderstanding about the role of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) in guidance in Ireland and about our role in Europe and internationally. Hopefully what follows will clarify the vital links between EU Agendas across education, training and employment, and developments in guidance services in schools and further education and training (FET). Hopefully too it will clarify the need to have a national agency with a dedicated role to connect with what's happening in Europe, so as to inform national developments in guidance.

NCGE is an agency of the Department of Education, responsible for informing policy and supporting practice in guidance provision in lifelong learning and education. One key aim of NCGE is to contribute to 'the exchange of information on guidance counselling provision and practice with other guidance and employment services ... through the Euroguidance Centre, both in Ireland and in other Member States of the EU'.

Guidance (or *lifelong guidance*) is an umbrella term used internationally to refer to a great range of guidance-related activities: provision of career and education information, assessment, delivery of learning to support career development

Why Should We Be Aware of European Policies in Education and Guidance?

An introduction to current EU Agenda policies directly affecting national developments in education, training, and guidance sectors



Jennifer McKenzie

Director, National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)

“The various EU policies aim to support Member States to collaborate, innovate, and share good practice in education and training.”

competences, delivery of group and one-to-one guidance counselling, facilitating referral, and much more. Guidance also requires adherence to core principles of impartial, quality services delivered by appropriately qualified staff, in models to suit each target group.

When we reflect on Europe, we often think of finance and of legal matters for Member States, or more recently the EU response to the global pandemic. At EU level, each Member State is responsible for the competence areas of education and training. That is, each country determines its own education and training curriculum, delivery of compulsory education, school entry and leaving ages, and so on.

However, the various EU policies aim to support Member States to collaborate, innovate, and share good practice in education and training. They aim to address shared challenges, to set objectives, and to find ways to measure progress and support cross-border and EU-wide cooperation.¹

Here we will consider four of these key EU policies – European Education Area, Digital Action Plan, European Pillar of Social Rights, and European Green Deal – and see how they are informing review or development of current national strategies.

European Education Area

This policy aims to foster cooperation between EU Member States to enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems. Six key areas have been outlined, each of which will ultimately inform national developments:²

- quality in education
- inclusion and gender equality
- green and digital transitions
- teachers and trainers: development and training for professional teachers, trainers, and educational staff, including international mobility of teachers and in teacher education to broaden access to and understanding of the diversity of quality teaching approaches to meet the needs of all pupils
- higher education
- geopolitical dimension.

Digital Action Plan

This policy initiative supports EU Member States' sustainable and effective adaptation of education and training systems to the digital age and provides a long-term strategic vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible European digital education.

Opportunities such as the digitalisation of teaching methods and pedagogies and the provision of infrastructure required for inclusive and resilient remote learning are currently being explored, along with the challenges

highlighted by students and adults affected by the digital divide. Ensuring accessibility for all to education and training options starts with access to appropriate IT equipment and adequate broadband, an issue highlighted across Ireland and the EU during the school and college closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.³

European Pillar of Social Rights

Most people are aware of the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. The UN is calling for global partnership to end poverty and develop global strategies to improve health and education and reduce inequality while tackling climate change and supporting economic growth.⁴

At EU level, these global goals are recast as the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which aim at developing a Europe that is 'fair, inclusive, and full of opportunity'. These 20 principles are clustered into three areas:

- equal opportunities and access to the labour market
- fair working conditions
- social protection and inclusion.

At the heart of these social rights is for people to have access to 'quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market'.

Gender equality, social inclusion, supports to access employment, and so on are key aspects of guidance provision, ensuring that everyone has access to impartial information to support their own career decision-making. This work does not stop when someone leaves compulsory education!

Nor is it relevant only at the point of unemployment. Every adult transition – e.g., when childcare or family care is a priority, when disability or illness has affected work life, when upskilling for job prospects is required, when basic education or literacy issues are affecting career prospects – requires impartial information and guidance supports to make life- and career-changing decisions.⁵

European Green Deal

In July 2021 in Ireland, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 was signed into law.⁶ It states that Ireland 'shall, so as to reduce the extent of further global warming, pursue and achieve, by no later than the end of the year 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy' (section 5.3.1).

This legislation will lead to different and expanding opportunities in education, training, and employment across Ireland. It reflects the

“ Access to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning are at the heart of EU social rights.

“ There are opportunities to meet and exchange practice with colleagues across Europe, and create Europe-wide partnerships...

European Green Deal,⁷ which aims to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy, ensuring:

- no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050
- economic growth decoupled from resource use
- no person and no place left behind.

National developments

Also worth noting are the strategic developments or national reviews launched in 2021, which reflect interdepartmental approaches that have direct influence on citizens, society, and the economy. Each in some way incorporates and reflects the overarching policy agendas laid out by EU Agendas:

- Adult Literacy for Life⁸
- Consultation on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education⁹
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021–2025¹⁰
- Joint Public Consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030¹¹

EU Skills Agenda

Finally, the EU Skills Agenda outlines an EU-wide five-year plan, which incorporates the European Green Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights, to help people and businesses develop more and better skills to strengthen sustainable competitiveness, ensuring social fairness and 'providing access to education, training and lifelong learning for everybody, everywhere in the EU'.¹²

The EU Skills Agenda aims to ensure that people have the 'right skills for jobs' and are 'supported in their lifelong learning pathways'. Again, a key pillar is to ensure that people have access to quality impartial information¹³ and supports to make decisions about their education and career, by providing guidance services that 'can help job-seekers, students, adult learners and others make well-informed decisions on skills, qualifications, opportunities to travel and study abroad, and career development'. Here, the EU Commission details the role of the European Euroguidance Network.¹⁴

In accordance with these overarching policies, and to achieve these various aims, the EU Commission confirmed in 2021 that the overall budget for Erasmus for 2021–2027 has been increased to over €26 billion:

Erasmus+ mobility has positive effects on educational, social, personal, and professional development, in that it enhances knowledge, skills and attitudes, improves employability, helps confidence-building and independence, stimulates curiosity and innovation, fosters the understanding of other people, and builds a sense of European belonging.¹⁵

It is crucial to understand that this funding is not just to support students to complete a year abroad during their undergraduate degree. Funding is

available to support higher education, vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (FET in Ireland), and early childhood education, while youth and sport groups can also apply for various versions of Erasmus+ grants. More information is available through the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) EURIreland resource¹⁶ and Léargas.¹⁷

For staff in the education and FET sectors, principals, subject teachers or tutors, coordinators, and guidance counsellors, there are opportunities to meet and exchange practice with colleagues across Europe, learn about new practices, and create Europe-wide partnerships for the development of education and training practices.

Bringing all this knowledge into practice

Maintaining NCGE's remit to engage in information exchanges with the EU Commission and colleagues across Europe, Euroguidance Ireland, hosted by NCGE, is part of the European Commission-funded Euroguidance Network of 64 centres across Europe, designated to promote and support the competence development of guidance practitioners.¹⁸

Euroguidance Ireland collaborates with colleagues in the post-primary and FET programmes to ensure an integrated approach to supporting the European dimension of guidance delivery. It does this by providing information for guidance practitioners on the various EU policies and resources to encourage students to consider all their learning and training opportunities across the EU.

Since 2017, NCGE has introduced the concept and processes of a Whole School Guidance Framework,¹⁹ which supports school managers and guidance counsellors to develop and deliver the guidance plan and guidance programme in collaboration with all school management and staff.

Within this framework, Euroguidance Ireland developed the Euro-Quest module20 for Transition Year to support students to learn about the opportunities for learning and work and volunteering across Europe while developing their career research and decision-making skills. Ideally, students reflect on their career interests, language skills, and cultural issues and complete a project on how to pursue their chosen career with education and training in other EU countries. This will help them to make impartial, fully informed, life-changing decisions that are not based simply on, for example, needing fewer points to do dentistry in another country!

The competences that students need to develop now in addition to their subject or career specialisms include language skills, soft or transferrable skills, flexibility and adaptability, a global-citizen approach, and multicultural and anti-racist approaches. These are all the skills learned from living and learning or working abroad or engaging with exchange programmes with our EU neighbours.

It is not just students and young people who need to develop these skills. When was the last time you engaged with someone in Spain, Luxembourg, or Bulgaria in a similar career role to learn from their approach to teaching, or management, or guidance provision?

It is incumbent on those of us in policy development, education management, teaching and learning, and guidance service provision to be informed about how EU Agenda policies and priorities are directly affecting our national, regional, and local developments and practice. That way we too can contribute to a more fair and equitable society, enhancing quality education and gender equality, and providing impartial guidance to ensure access to equal opportunities and social inclusion. And maybe we can try to save the planet along the way.

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This article highlights the progression routes and opportunities for skills development in further education and training, looking beyond direct entry to third-level education, and shows why FET can 'hold the key to that degree'.

Further education and training in Ireland

Ireland has traditionally had high levels of direct progression to third-level education. When free second-level education was introduced, it transformed society, enabling school-leavers to build academic careers rather than craft. This left an unhealthy focus on the third-level academic pathway as the preferred option of the vast majority of parents for their children.

Many students are not suited to academic learning at second level, and the heightened academic routine associated with third level may be mismatched with their natural learning preferences. This is where further education and training (FET) comes into its own, with pathways to get to the same destination while earning money and gaining work experience and life skills alongside academic learning.

FET routes offer a wide variety of lifelong education options for learners who wish to develop their abilities and skills in a way best suited to them, and to progress in a flexible time frame suited to their lifestyle. As well as giving school-leavers a direct route into many careers, FET can take learners further throughout their career. The idea that a burst of education in our late teens and early 20s is enough to last an entire career is no longer feasible. Through FET, we can upskill and re-skill, as well as benefiting from 'earn while you learn' programmes that benefit us and our employers.

FET is at the heart of every community throughout Ireland, enhancing engagement and integration across the country. Options include apprenticeships, traineeships, Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, community and adult education, and core literacy and numeracy services. The world is changing, and FET is changing with it. As a nation, we have learnt to pivot to new ways of working and learning, and FET is now taking centre stage.

The Value and Appeal of Further Education and Training

Shining a light on FET in Ireland in 2021



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When Simon Harris was appointed Minister for Further and Higher Education in June 2020, one of his first official duties was to launch a new FET strategy that aims to repair, repurpose, and revive our economy and our communities over the next five years. The strategy marks a pivotal moment for FET. The ways we work, learn, do business, and engage with each other have changed fundamentally and will continue to do so. People are making different career and lifestyle choices, employers are adopting new business models, and education providers are working to embed technology fully in the delivery of learning to keep up with technological changes.

There is already significant social and economic damage as a result of the global health crisis, and FET is working to support the upskilling and re-skilling of those who need a route back into sustainable employment, the reinvigoration of communities hit hard by restrictions, and the competitiveness of businesses as they seek a return to growth. It is an ambitious strategy based on building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways.

Building skills

The ways that we work, learn, do business, and even interact with each other are changing. The world is being transformed by megatrends such as globalisation, digitalisation, ageing demographics, and climate change. The impacts of current and future technological advances on our working lives will be stark, with significantly increased use of automation, smart technology, artificial intelligence, big data, and augmented and virtual reality.

“ FET is working to support the upskilling and re-skilling of those who need a route back into sustainable employment...”

While vocational and technical skills will remain important, they will continually and rapidly evolve. A member of the workforce will be unlikely to prosper in their career unless they are equipped with essential 'meta-skills' in areas like complex problem-solving, emotional intelligence, creativity, service orientation, and cognitive flexibility.

The current skills shortage exists not only in Ireland but across Europe, making it difficult for companies to find workers with the qualifications they need. There will always be a role for the traditional academic undergraduate degree, but it must reflect the changing nature of the world. FET offers solutions to Ireland's skills shortage, with 'micro qualifications' and 'earn as you learn' courses that allow people to upskill without committing to full-time degrees. Upskilling allows people to broaden their knowledge and skill set as well as those of the team.

For FET to make the impact it deserves, there will have to be a major change in perceptions of the relationship between education or training and social class. Other European countries have a history of developing highly skilled, apprenticeship-rooted workers who are recognised to have equal standing with those who progress through third level.

Small class sizes in the further education sector, alongside project-based assessment methods and work placements with local employers, are particularly suitable. More collaboration between industry and education will mean that relevant programmes are designed in conjunction with local

employers and are aligned with their needs, so the skills developed on a course are relevant to both the local and wider labour markets.

Fostering inclusion

Ireland has a diverse and vibrant society, and FET has an important role in community education to help the integration of our diverse population. FET enables equality and cohesion to flourish in communities, and works with government to create a fair, inclusive, and equitable Ireland for all.

In September 2021, the government launched its Adult Literacy for Life strategy (SOLAS, 2021b). Covid-19 brought technology to the forefront of all aspects of day-to-day life, yet as the strategy details, 47% of adults in Ireland lack basic digital skills. This stops them not only accessing some everyday services but also unleashing their full potential for employment, further widening the Irish skills gap. FET providers will help make digital literacy skills accessible to all, allowing adults across Ireland to participate fully in society and also to strengthen the country's workforce.

The vision for FET is to provide pathways for everyone, to empower learners to participate fully in society and become active citizens, and to drive vibrant and diverse communities. FET will become the smart choice for school-leavers, employees looking to upskill, and learners at all stages of their lives. Future FET colleges will be 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.

FET will become the smart choice for school-leavers, employees looking to upskill, and learners at all stages of their lives.

Facilitating pathways

The breadth of provision offered through FET is as impressive as it is diverse. From community programmes, family learning, integration, and inclusion initiatives to traineeships and apprenticeships, FET can put people on a pathway to anywhere they want to go in education, work, and life.

For a growing number of students, FET is the best route to their chosen career. Whether they have a particular job in mind and want the most direct route to it, are uncertain about what they want to do long-term but are keen to try a new area of learning, or want an alternative way into third level because they didn't get the points for the course they wanted, FET is the answer. It provides three routes designed to help school-leavers progress: PLC courses, apprenticeships, and traineeships. Each can act as a stepping stone into higher education or as a way to try something new or progress directly into a career.

PLC courses are full-time one- and two-year courses that offer a mix of practical and academic work and work experience. A huge part of their appeal, and their value, is that they focus on a mix of technical knowledge, core skills, and work experience. Small classes allow students to benefit from more one-to-one interaction; this can make PLC courses a great bridge to employment or third level. Courses such as pre-nursing, law,

or business can provide an alternative route into such courses at third level. Completion of a PLC course typically leads to an award at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level 5 or 6.

Apprenticeships combine college learning with work-based learning, and the 'off the job' element is delivered either as a block of full-time training in a training centre or on a day-release basis (SOLAS, 2021c). Qualifications range from QQI level 6 to master's degrees and PhD doctorates.

The recent resumption of economic activity and the government's programme for housing mean there are big increases in the numbers of people taking up well-respected crafts, offering routes to careers in areas such as electrical, plumbing, and engineering. Careers in construction offer bright futures to those interested in the industry. Many existing apprenticeships are world-class, and Irish apprentices are well regarded, with Ireland consistently performing well at WorldSkills competitions.

The range of apprenticeships is set to broaden further, to include green skills like wind turbine maintenance and white-collar areas such as international financial services and software or asset management. A new healthcare-assistant apprenticeship is expected to be especially popular, and there are programmes in farm management/technician, applied horticulture, construction, and leisure.



The lord mayor of Cork visits the carpentry and joinery workshop at Cork Training Centre

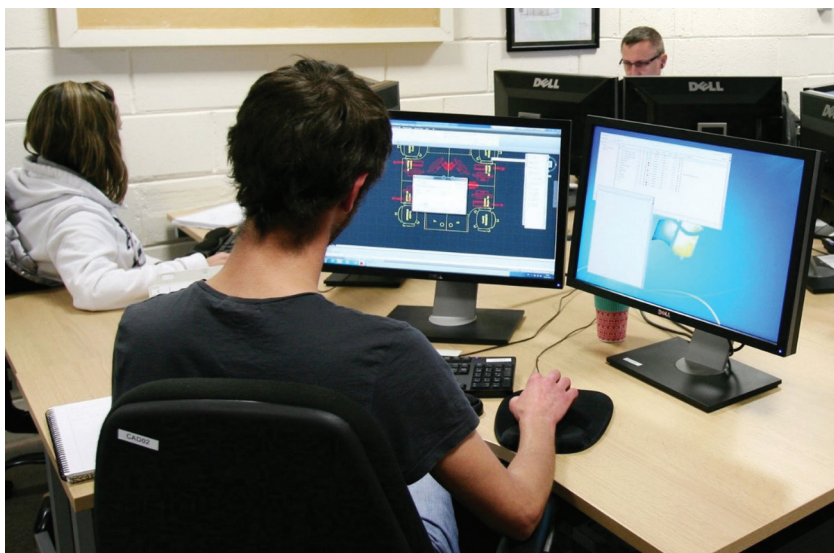
Coupled with ICT options like cybersecurity and computer networking, there is a path for all learners. With 62 types of apprenticeship, all allowing apprentices to 'earn while they learn', they are not just an alternative to third level but a different route to the same destination.

Apprenticeship numbers will double in the coming years under the government action plan (SOLAS, 2021a), and we must now engage fully with these options to develop opportunities in education and in the future world of work. The plan's five objectives are shown in the diagram:

Objective 1: A High Quality and Innovative Approach	Apprenticeship will deliver the highest quality of work-based learning, supporting and demonstrating innovation to empower apprentices and employers to meet current and emerging skills needs.
Objective 2: Employer-driven Responses	Apprenticeship will be recognised and valued by employers across all sectors of the economy as a key mechanism for building a highly skilled workforce, contributing to productivity and sustainable growth.
Objective 3: Apprenticeship for All	The profile of the apprenticeship population will more closely reflect the profile of the general population.
Objective 4: A Valued Option	Apprenticeship will be available and recognised as a work based learning opportunity, providing sought after qualifications across the tertiary education and training sector.
Objective 5: A Single Coherent System	There will be a single apprenticeship system underpinned by a clear governance framework with stakeholder input.

Five objectives in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025 (SOLAS, 2021a)

Traineeships are developed and delivered by ETBs in partnership with industry and employers. They are shorter than apprenticeships, typically lasting one or two years, and are designed to provide strong work experience so that participants leave with job-ready skills. A training allowance is paid to eligible learners.



IT class at Cork Training Centre

Current programmes include radio broadcasting, beauty therapy, medical administration, and childcare. All lead to NFQ levels 4–6 awards. These are specific courses designed for people to progress directly to working and will be an important part of rebuilding the economy.

The future of FET is exciting. The future of FET is now. All of us in FET need to continue to grow its profile to ensure that the sustainable value set out in the FET strategy can be widely acknowledged. Then it can start to change the hearts and minds of Irish society with regard to school leaving and lifelong education options.

There is a place for everyone to join this journey in transforming learning. FET is vital to developing these skills for us as individuals and as an economy. The full range of FET programmes can be seen at www.fetch.ie.

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Sara Mc Fadden from Castlebar, Co Mayo, one of 68 students awarded Sports Scholarships at IT Sligo. Sara is Ireland's first visually impaired person to compete in rallying.



This article highlights the importance of professional learning and development, the need to think differently in the midst of a pandemic, and the diverse activities and approaches taken across Ireland's Education and Training Boards in the past year.

Introduction

Never before has the importance of learning and development been highlighted as it has in the Covid-19 pandemic. In the past 18 months this crisis has brought to the forefront the skills and abilities of key personnel in health, emergency services, education, postal, and retail to deal with the devastating effect on health, learning, and wellbeing. It is because many of these professions have placed such importance on ongoing learning and development that these professionals have the knowledge, skills, and training to respond to the virus and can adapt and look for solutions both individually and collectively.

With closures and lockdowns across the education sector in 2020 and 2021, educators and professional development professionals alike have had to move rapidly to a different approach to teaching. In the further education and training (FET) sector, the change has been fully embraced for the sake of the learners who continue to access its services in these challenging times.

In the business world, no commercial industry can take care of its customers effectively before it looks after its employees. Similarly, in education, learning facilities cannot take care of their learners without first taking care of those who provide the education and its supports.

In early 2020, SOLAS launched its FET Professional Learning and Development: Statement of Strategy 2020–2024, following its original 2016–2019 Professional Development Strategy. A key goal is to 'build the capability of those who work in the FET sector through the identification and deployment of strategic professional learning and development initiatives in priority areas' (SOLAS, 2020).

In the FET sector, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have put systems in place to support a planned approach to professional learning and development (PLD). Through the great work of

The Changing World of Learning and Development in FET

Professional learning and development in the Education and Training Boards



Moira Walsh
Director of People,
SOLAS

“The focus FETFest was on learning through technology, health, motivation, inclusion, and transformative thinking.”

“We worked hard to establish our group and build relationships, and we respect and trust the individuals in the collective – we know we are better together.”

PLD coordinators across the country, highly crafted and engaging learning and development initiatives have been operationalised at local, regional, and national levels.

Current PLD in the FET sector

Professional learning and development is now as diverse as the people who partake in it, the subjects that are covered, and the time it takes to complete the learning. I could easily fill this Yearbook with a description of all the game-changing initiatives that have been developed and rolled out across the ETB FET sector in the past year, so with a limited number of words available I asked the experts, the PLD professionals in ETBs, to share some of the highlights to date.

One event, which led to a turning point in my own professional learning journey, took place in June 2021. FETFest, a virtual event, was the brainchild of Ashley Stephens, PLD and research coordinator in Kildare and Wicklow ETB. Its focus for five days was on learning through technology, health, motivation, inclusion, and transformative thinking. The week featured 21 live events and more than 40 on-demand sessions from educators across Ireland.

FETFest was opened by Minister Simon Harris, and its programme included eight international presenters, including keynote speakers George Couros and Eric Sheninger on the future of learning and development on an international stage. To quote Eric, 'It all comes down to relationships. Without trust, there is no relationship. Without relationships no real learning occurs.'

This speaks so strongly about the PLD network: as Ashley Stephens said, 'We worked hard to establish our group and build relationships, and we respect and trust the individuals in the collective – we know we are better together.'

Twitter was on fire over the five days, which saw FETFest trending in Ireland. On the worldwide stage, this evidenced the learning that was taking place over the week and beyond. As I said on Twitter, 'FETFest looked effortless, creating space for everyone to contribute, not to compete, which makes for one of the most interesting and mind-blowing conferences I have ever attended.' You too can experience the festival of learning and engage in some PLD on the FETFest YouTube channel: <https://bit.ly/fetfestchannel>.

In addition, and showing the diverse nature of PLD delivery in ETBs, Carrie Archer, PLD coordinator at City of Dublin ETB, has established a level 9 postgraduate certificate in Diversity and Inclusion specifically for the FET sector. This programme recognises that those who educate and provide supports are as diverse and unique as those who receive its benefits, and provides the essential learning for FET practitioners. A separate article on this topic appears elsewhere in this chapter of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*.

Also in June 2021, Carrie and Ashley worked together to present a journey of PLD at the International Leadership for Professional Learning Symposium. They facilitated a focused conversation using *Alice in Wonderland* as a metaphor to structure professional dialogue for exploring PLD 'Through the Looking Glass', which considered how digital tools encourage reflective practice and communication towards building communities of practice.

Laois and Offaly ETB's FET service held its first ever Inclusion Week from 4–8 October, rolled out by Jessica Mullen, PLD coordinator of LOETB. It was a resounding success, with over 1,000 FET colleagues attending the events taking place in our FET centres. It also included our online Lunch & Learn series, which featured guest speakers such as AsIAM, Caroline Martin of CDETB, Deirdre Madden from UCC, and Roisin Doherty of SOLAS, who helped open the event. These guest speakers and professional learning sessions gave our colleagues the opportunity to reflect and consider their approach to inclusive practice. To coincide with Traveller Mental Health Day, learners from Mountmellick FET centre planted a hazel tree, a symbol of travellers' strength, history, culture, and resilience.



Kerry ETB rolled out guidelines on technology-enhanced teaching and learning for staff and learners – powerful tools to harness all the positive aspects of online learning tools and the richness of the classroom experience. Sharon Brown, the ETB's adult education officer, had a clear goal not only to produce guidelines in this space but also to integrate them into everyday educational life. She highlighted that technology is here to stay and provided supports to allow for real change in the learning classroom, for example via ePortfolio, the flipped-classroom approach, and digital assessments.

Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) held its first Winter Connect Showcase using a Microsoft Teams live event, celebrating the creativity and resilience of the DDLETB learning community. It was attended by over 17,000 people.

So many other initiatives have been implemented this year. One that has been delivered countrywide is the TEL (Technology-Enhanced Learning) Mentoring programme established by staff for staff, to close the gap for those who want to embrace new ideas in educational technology. Donegal ETB, through its TEL coordinator, Treasa McGinley, rolled out this initiative, and Donegal ETB's practitioners are already reaping the rewards.

The list could go on, with so many initiatives and such a focus on professional learning and development. But in conclusion, I can simply say that the future is bright in this FET space, for educators and learners alike!

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Carbery farmers achieve Diplomas in Environmental Science as part of innovative programme with UCC.

In December 2021, 15 Carbery farmers graduated from UCC with a Diploma in Environmental Science and Social Policy. These farmers are part of an innovative first-of-its-kind partnership with UCC, to achieve their qualification through 'Retrospective Prior Learning' (RPL).

The partnership with UCC came about in 2017 when a pilot project was launched with a group of farmers from the Carbery Greener Dairy Farms programme. The goal was to ensure that the practical learnings taken by farmers from Carbery's Greener Dairy programme would be academically recognised by University College Cork (UCC) by means of RPL - Recognition of Prior Learning.

Under this process, UCC recognises the competencies, experience and skills learned by farmers who participated in the Greener Dairy project. The farmers are awarded over 60% of the credits needed for UCC's level 7 diploma in environmental science and social policy. Farmers are then given the option by UCC to achieve the remaining credits needed for the diploma in a more formal learning environment.

"To date, 38 of our farmer suppliers have completed this course and have been awarded diplomas by UCC. Having a diploma in environmental science and social policy gives those farmers huge confidence in themselves for what they have achieved," says Enda Buckley, Director of Sustainability at Carbery.

"And for us, it shows that our farmers are well ahead of the curve in terms of being interested in why and how to farm sustainably."

This article highlights the importance of professional learning and development, the need to think differently in the midst of a pandemic, and the diverse activities and approaches taken across Ireland's Education and Training Boards in the past year.

What?

In May 2020, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) officially met for the first time to discuss the potential of a new level 9 postgraduate certificate in Diversity and Inclusion, specifically for further education and training (FET). This collaboration was part of the vision of CDETB's director of further education, Blake Hodgkinson, who recognised that the needs of those who educate and provide support in the FET sector are as diverse and unique as those of the learners we work with. The course was intended to be responsive to and inclusive of the many different workers in FET, not just educators. The overall aim was to make each FET student's experience as valuable, empowering, and consistent as possible.

After several meetings between CDETB and TCD, a design team led by Dr Keith Johnston was established to explore the possibilities of this vision. Representing CDETB were Carrie Archer, professional learning and development coordinator, and Dr Anne Costelloe, head teacher in Mountjoy Education Service to Prisons. From TCD, expertise was engaged from Dr Joanne Banks, programme coordinator, and Prof. Michael Shevlin.

A three-module blended programme was designed. Module one addresses theories underpinning equality, diversity, and inclusion, and module two explores inclusive classroom practices through the lens of universal design for learning (UDL). The final module, titled 'Speaking to Diversity', focuses on the transformative nature of inclusive practice and explores how the group can support each other into the future to ingrain what they've learned into their specific context and into the CDETB as a whole.

Postgraduate Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion in FET

A collaborative and transformative endeavour



Carrie Archer
Professional Learning and Development Coordinator, City of Dublin Education and Training Board



Dr. Keith Johnston
Trinity College Dublin

"The course design is underpinned by principles of inclusion and accessibility and the blended learning format helps enable course participants to balance studying part-time with the demands of their busy professional roles."



During the consultation phase for the development of CDETB's Statement of Strategy 2021–2025, staff identified some target areas as organisational strategic priorities. These include people and pedagogy, for which key themes are staff development, teaching,

learning and assessment, student supports, and andragogy (the theory and practice of adult learning).

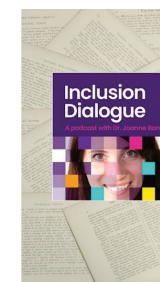
CDETB is a place to learn, grow, and develop, both individually and collectively. Staff are encouraged and supported to engage with continuous, contextual learning and development through active engagement with both accredited and non-accredited activities and processes. Through experimentation, implementation, evaluation, and reflection, professional learning and development will result in enhancement of practices and personal and professional growth. This collective growth will result in agility to respond to the needs of CDETB and its wider community.

This working definition of professional learning and development in CDETB underpins the rationale for and design of this course.

So What? The wider context

SOLAS's Professional Development Strategy 2016–2020 was compiled to develop a strategic approach to professional learning and development (PLD) in FET and to identify target areas for support to FET practitioners. Evidence from FET staff consultation highlighted a need for coordinated, quality-assured, strategically focused, and consistent PLD opportunities in the sector. FET practitioners said that a key challenge with current PLD provision is that courses tend to be too general, not appropriate for the FET context, and not relevant to their specific requirements.

Consequently, one of three strategic goals identified was to increase FET sector capability through relevant, targeted professional development. A key priority under this goal was to target development interventions for working with and supporting FET learners, because practitioners' confidence was lowest in related areas, including dealing with challenging behaviours, addressing literacy and numeracy in the learning environment, and engaging and supporting learners with diverse needs (SOLAS, 2019).



Dr. Joanne Banks
Trinity College Dublin

"By emphasising the importance of pedagogical approaches like Universal Design for Learning, this course provides an exciting opportunity to promote inclusive and equitable education in further education settings in direct response to growing student diversity"



The FET Strategy 2020–2024 is built on three strategic pillars: Building Skills, Fostering Inclusion, and Facilitating Pathways. Fostering Inclusion recognises that rooting FET in the community, targeting priority cohorts, providing consistent literacy and

numeracy supports, and providing consistent learner supports with a universal design approach underpinning learning development and delivery are integral to the delivery of a quality educational experience for all FET learners (SOLAS, 2020).

CDETB serves the area covered by Dublin City Council and has 16 FET colleges, 10 Youthreach centres, two training centres, and an adult education service in five separate areas across the city. It also provides education in seven prisons, and it funds many community training centres (CTCs) and local training initiatives (LTIs). Not only are our learners diverse, but our staff are too.

Provision in CDETB is delivered by over 3,200 staff to almost 30,000 learners (12,000 full-time, 17,500 part-time), including:

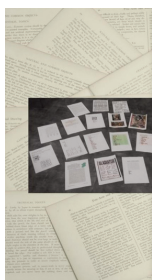
- early school leavers
- learners with intellectual disabilities
- learners with additional needs
- learners with low educational attainment
- asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants
- offenders and ex-offenders
- learners who are homeless
- learners with low literacy or numeracy levels
- learners from the Traveller community
- learners with English as an additional language.

In 2019, of the 13,098 learners nationally who reported at least one disability, 2,237 (17%) were enrolled in the City of Dublin ETB. This course acknowledges that to accommodate the diversity of learners in FET, the best pedagogical practices must be embedded in everyday practice (Dulee-Kinsolving & Guerin, 2020).

Now What? What does this course mean for the sector?

The FET Strategy 2020–2024 strongly upholds that FET is for everyone; central to this is ensuring a consistent learner experience. FET is committed to embracing the wider benefits of learning and its core values of lifelong learning, social justice, active citizenship, and economic prosperity. Empowering and enabling FET practitioners to respond to the increasing diversity of learners in the sector underpins their capacity and potential to meet strategic goals and goes beyond (SOLAS, 2020).

Teacher professional learning is a complex, recursive process. Two key themes underpinned the



Dr. Anne Costelloe

Head Teacher Mountjoy
CDETB Education Service to Prisons
"Prison educators can often feel isolated and somewhat 'different' from other FE teachers because of the prison's unique context, engagement on a course like this lessens that sense of isolation and allows for a shared understanding across a range of educational services."



Blake Hodkinson

Director of Further Education and Training
CDETB
"The more that we have considered how best to include students and meet their needs the better we can deliver our service. For CDETB, with 35 staff on the course, I am hoping this will start conversations and actions that will transform our delivery."



design of this course. First, there was acknowledgement of each participant's individuality and the initial conditions they start with. Second, there needed to be a long-term focus on five drivers of professional learning: the ability to 'self-organise and interact; reflect and inquire; identify and negotiate boundaries; consolidate, challenge and create; and make connections' (Keay, et al., 2019, p. 232).

It is imperative that professional learning occurring on the course be implemented and embedded long-term in CDETB, so the course was carefully constructed to be participative and transformative as opposed to transmissive. Each of the three blended modules builds on the others and is open to interpretation by the person, depending on their initial conditions and context. 'Personal purpose is the route to organisational change,' writes Fullan (1993, p. 14), and at all stages participants will be challenged to explore their 'why': that is, their purpose (Sinek, 2009). Participants are supported and facilitated to acknowledge any unconscious biases and to use personal purpose to motivate them to consciously contextualise and then embed learning into practice.

Both design and delivery aim to ensure that collaborative group work results in participants learning more about other areas of CDETB and FET provision and that relationships and cross-service awareness will support and sustain autonomous professional learning. There is recognition and appreciation that collaborative and reflective dialogue pushes for improvement in student learning (Newmann et al., 2000). Reflective dialogue occurs when 'colleagues in an institution listen to each other carefully and question their beliefs and feel eager to change these beliefs in a candid and unbiased way' (Hirsh & Hord, 2010, cited in Dogan et al., 2019, p. 232).

Reflective, collaborative dialogue can effect greater change in educational practice (Kruse et al., 1995, cited in Dogan et al., 2019). Reflective dialogue also informs lecturers further about FET and its complexities, bridging the theory–practice divide (Jackson & Burch, 2016). Ongoing, meaningful evaluation is crucial, and evaluation of the impact of this professional development opportunity will include affective reactions, participant learning, instructional changes, and impacts on learners (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019) as lecturers and participants work together to effect real change in the FET sector.

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Winners of Enterprise Ireland's 2021 Student Entrepreneur of the Year Award



L-R: Tim Farrelly, Bachelor of Engineering student at Trinity College Dublin; David Deneher, BA in Computer Science and Business student at Trinity College Dublin and Omar Salem, Master of Aerospace Engineering student at Queen's University Belfast.

Students from third-level institutions nationwide, who have an innovative business idea with real commercial potential, are invited to apply to this year's Student Entrepreneur Awards.

This is the 41st year of the Student Entrepreneur Awards, co-sponsored by Cruickshank, Grant Thornton and the Local Enterprise Offices. The awards are part of a campaign to encourage students from all academic disciplines to start their own business as a career option.

Ten finalists will be selected to compete for several awards including the Cruickshank High Achieving Merit Award, the Grant Thornton High Achieving Merit Award and the Local Enterprise Office ICT Award.

The overall winner will share in a €35,000 prize fund and receive mentoring from Enterprise Ireland to develop the commercial viability of their concept.

The other award winners will also receive expert advice and mentoring support from Enterprise Ireland and programme sponsors to assist them in turning their ideas into commercial realities.

FET Enterprise Challenges and Opportunities

In a rapidly changing world of work, it is important that enterprise engagement be increased to ensure that the programmes delivered best reflect the current and future skill needs of industry. This article outlines why this matters and how it might best be achieved.

Introduction

Today we live in a much less certain world. Disruption is the order of the day, brought about by technological changes and now global pandemics and climate change. In this article I will share some thoughts on the opportunities and challenges for further education and training (FET) and how the sector can best position itself to continue to meet the upskilling needs of companies.

My role as a regional skills manager in the mid-west gives me a unique insight into the world of learning and upskilling from both enterprise and education-provider perspectives, arising from my engagement with employers across industry sectors, from micro businesses to multinationals.

The Regional Skills Forum (RSF) is a national network of nine Regional Skills Fora supported by the Skills Planning Enterprise Engagement (SPEE) unit in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The work undertaken by the RSF reflects the government's strong focus on strengthening links between industry and providers of education and training, to ensure that workers and graduates have the skills necessary to meet new and emerging job roles.

In summary, the RSF has three primary functions:

- engage with industry and create links with education and training providers
- identify skills needs and gaps in programme provision
- implement upskilling responses (new courses) in collaboration with education and training providers.

Changing world of work

As I write this article, there is a growing shortage of labour and skills across all business sectors. Debate and analysis have offered up various reasons for why businesses are struggling to find new talent. When we talk about skills shortages or gaps, we must understand the labour market we



Joe Leddin
Manager of Mid-West
Regional Skills Forum

are operating in. On the demand side are employers seeking skilled talent, while on the supply side are providers: universities and further education colleges. By understanding each other's needs through greater engagement, we can ensure that learners have the relevant skills and competencies to meet employers' requirements.

One thing is certain. Despite our changing workplace, two essential skills are required for those looking to enter the labour force or advance in their career: interpersonal skills, such as leadership and customer service, and basic digital skills, such as navigating Microsoft Office or using the internet.

One challenge for FET is to assess how we can continue to resource and provide businesses with upskilling programmes to develop the digital skill levels of their workforce. The 'Explore' digital training programme funded by the DFHERIS and managed by Regional Skills Fora targets older workers with low or no digital skills. Year on year, the demand from employers across industry sectors to register workers for the programme shows the extent of the digital skills gap.

A report by SOLAS in June 2020, titled Digital Skills Requirements of Workers in Ireland, stated that 'the share of people working in low-skilled and medium-skilled occupations who need digital skills (any level) is greater than the EU average'. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a view held by many that every job can now be considered a STEM job, as workers engage with some form of digital process and data capture.

FET and industry skill needs

The FET sector has evolved considerably in recent years, in terms of both organisational change and programme delivery. The alignment of provision between post-Leaving Certificate courses, adult education, traineeships, and apprenticeships provides the platform to showcase to industry the scale and breadth of learning and upskilling on offer.

The nature of work and career pathways are evolving, and we have to challenge the belief that degrees alone are the passport to successful careers. I speak with employers daily, many of whom will hire based on the right skills and attitude over academic qualifications alone. An example of how the rules of talent acquisition are changing is the recent decision by IBM to abandon a core hiring rule of 'no degree, no job' in favour of work-based ICT apprenticeships, to ensure that employees had the right skill set.

Based on enterprise feedback, the future of work will therefore not just be about college degrees but about job skills and cultural fit. The FET sector has an opportunity to compete on a level playing field with universities, which in many cases are shielding students from the real world of work, with elongated degree programmes against work-based learning.

If we shift the focus from degrees to skills via apprenticeships and traineeships, we will create a larger and more diverse and representative workforce, while also reducing employment gaps, skill shortages, and social

“Based on enterprise feedback, the future of work will not just be about college degrees but about job skills and cultural fit.”

“FET is ideally placed to support companies in upskilling existing talent teams.”

exclusion. Achieving this requires active engagement with enterprise. Illustrating the speed of our changing workplace, a survey by Accenture stated that 65% of today's primary school children may work in jobs not yet created.

The FET sector is uniquely positioned to address this, with access to post-primary learners who are tomorrow's workforce. A more strategic approach to connecting enterprise with these learners can help ensure that students embark on the most suitable career path.

As Ireland moves into a post-pandemic period and our economy regrows, acute labour and skill shortages are impacting negatively on enterprise growth; left unresolved, these shortages will slow our social and economic progress. FET is ideally placed to support companies in upskilling existing talent teams while also responding to emerging skill needs, through new work-based traineeship and apprenticeship programmes in partnership with regional employers.

Another challenge for FET is to reassess its relationship with enterprise to create a strategy that makes employer engagement central to all future programme development.

The paradigm shift and industry desire for continuous learning outcomes to maintain a highly skilled workforce will mean transitioning to an always-on, skills-based education that embraces not just accreditation and certification but recognition of learning credits for on-the-job learning in partnership with industry. This viewpoint is articulated in many articles, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's 2019 Future Jobs Ireland report: 'In addition to improving provision of lifelong learning solutions, the engagement of enterprise with providers will be critical to successfully adjusting to the future economy' (p. 50).

Today, employers are looking for more than core technical skills and competency. They want people with transversal skills, an eye for detail, and the confidence to propose solutions to problems. These skills can be learnt more easily through traineeship and apprenticeship programmes, which the FET sector has the platform and expertise to deliver.

With acute labour shortages, talent retention is a key priority. Investing in worker development through upskilling is becoming the norm, even in sectors that heretofore undervalued the importance of career development and career pathways. With an increasing narrative on the value and importance of apprenticeships, it is also important to highlight the role of traineeships as a model of training in addressing skill shortages.

Traineeships are the lesser-known upskilling option for companies, yet they offer the agility for colleges of further education and training to create new talent pipelines in response to regional skill needs. A traineeship can range from 6 to 18 months, with employers supporting work placement that can account for 70% of overall learning.

Traineeships offer more immediate solutions to talent needs while also giving learners pathways to apprenticeships or higher education. To align programmes that meet industry skill needs in a way that will prove attractive to career-seekers and employers, more work must be done to promote traineeships as a model of training.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the training opportunities and upskilling supports that ETBs can provide, because many businesses are not aware of, or do not understand, the role that FET plays. This is an opportunity to increase engagement with enterprise. The geographical location of many FET centres offers significant potential to strengthen links with local companies in delivering regional skill needs.

The great resignation

A global survey by Microsoft of more than 30,000 workers showed that 41% were considering quitting their jobs or changing profession. Four million Americans quit their jobs in July, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The 'war for talent' is real. The 'great resignation' is now a popular phrase to highlight the huge challenges facing employers as their workers reassess their careers and lifestyles because of Covid-19.

Prospective employees now place a much higher value on career pathways before deciding on an employer or sector. Covid-19 has laid bare the sectors most affected, with workers transitioning to other sectors perceived as offering greater opportunities for personal development and career progression.

Talent retention is a top priority for companies as our labour market tightens further, while they simultaneously try to identify new skilled talent. Companies are acutely aware of the costs of talent drain: it is often said that people don't leave jobs – they leave cultures and organisations that don't offer career progression.

“ It is often said that people don't leave jobs – they leave cultures and organisations that don't offer career progression.

Employee movement across industry sectors presents FET with the potential to offer programmes up to and including level 6 to help employers retain talent and increase sectoral attractiveness to the next generation of talent. Employers that have historically experienced high employee turnover are more focused than ever on retaining talent. Providing new career pathways will help certain sectors to retain and attract new talent.

Increasing the percentage of those at work remaining in some form of upskilling requires greater alignment between FET programme offerings and enterprise. This is paramount if we are to provide employers and their workers with the right upskilling pathways.

Collaboration and clusters

The future of learning is a public-private partnership, as stated by the Future Jobs Ireland 2019 report. Education providers must offer the foundation for upskilling and training, but collaboration with industry is vital. Recent examples include the decision by global giants Amazon and Google to

upskill their own US-based workers in the absence of collaboration with state education providers.

Our value proposition in the mid-west region is collaboration. We are extremely fortunate to have several industry networks across ICT, manufacturing, logistics, aviation, retail, and hospitality. These networks, first and foremost, provide for relationship-building across companies in similar business sectors, the value of which we should never underestimate.

Successful regions the world over have examples of best-practice industry clusters. Ireland is slowly focusing more on the importance of clusters, and we have much work to do in developing and appreciating the social and economic value they can bring. Our regional industry networks enable an agile response to identified skill shortages, in partnership with both further and higher education providers.

Future skill needs

Changing skill needs are being driven principally by three factors: digitisation, climate change, and business processes. Sustainability in all its guises offers the FET sector another achievable opportunity in delivering the thousands of skilled workers required for the green economy and to retrofit, upgrade, and build the houses so desperately needed.

“ We need to embrace online delivery, continuous learning pathways, and short modular-type programmes.

In the current business landscape, there is no alternative to digital disruption. Both individuals and enterprises must either adapt to these changes or face being left behind. Digital technologies are already changing how businesses function, and processes are changing as companies embrace and adopt new forms of digital engagement.

How we learn, retrain, or upskill has also changed significantly with the move towards online delivery, shorter modular-type courses, and recognition of workplace learning. Education providers that offer agility in learning provision and place a higher value on work-based competencies and recognition of prior learning (RPL), as outlined in the FET strategy, will experience positive engagement with enterprise in terms of learner numbers.

New technologies and online learning are transforming how upskilling can be delivered. The speed of innovation will require education providers to continually adapt to newer learning methodologies. We need to embrace online delivery, continuous learning pathways, and short modular-type programmes if we are to significantly increase the percentage of those at work upskilling into the future.

Conclusion

Companies can no longer rely on our education and training providers to deliver a supply of skilled talent on their own. They must engage more actively in the design of programmes to ensure that the next generation of talent will have the skills necessary to meet changing occupational job roles and tasks. Transversal skills are unlikely to become obsolete by

technological innovation or economic disruptions. In a changing world of work, with increased remote and flexible working, these skills are even more important as workers interact less in workplace environments.

The prevailing viewpoint of many in industry, especially SMEs (small to medium-sized enterprises), that learning is a long-term commitment of time, travel, and costs underlines the importance of communicating the changing nature of learning towards shorter, online, and blended options. These are becoming more readily available across training providers.

With Covid-19 restrictions easing, we need to tell the great story that is FET through a variety of communication channels, including on-site or virtual showcase events for employers to improve awareness of the learning proposition on offer.

The world of learning is a competitive marketplace. Education providers that place a greater value on enterprise engagement will be more innovative and responsive in their programme provision to meet the changing skill needs of business.



Some of the most recent group of Carbery farmer graduates who were presented with their diplomas in UCC in November 2021.

Left to right: Ian Kingston, Dermot O'Leary, Jerome O'Brien, Tadhg O'Mahony, Diarmuid Manning, Belinda Gascoigne (UCC), Brendan Brady, Michael Nyhan and Vanessa O'Connor

New Thinking in FET

Covid-19 as a catalyst and driving force for advancing the sector

This article is an opinion piece on how Covid-19 has accelerated the FET strategy in the last 20 months. It gives examples on how SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science supported the enabling themes of the strategy to transform the sector.

Introduction

When I reflect on the last 20 months of further education and training (FET), the proverb 'necessity is the mother of invention' springs to mind. Since March 2020, FET, like all other essential sectors of society, adapted and reformed. Add into the mix the government response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic stimuli provided for FET, the publication by SOLAS of Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020–2024, and the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and it's safe to say that Ireland Inc. has accelerated the FET sector in a short space of time.

This article presents my opinion on the drivers of change that have reshaped the capacity of FET to take on board new ways of thinking in the past year and a half.

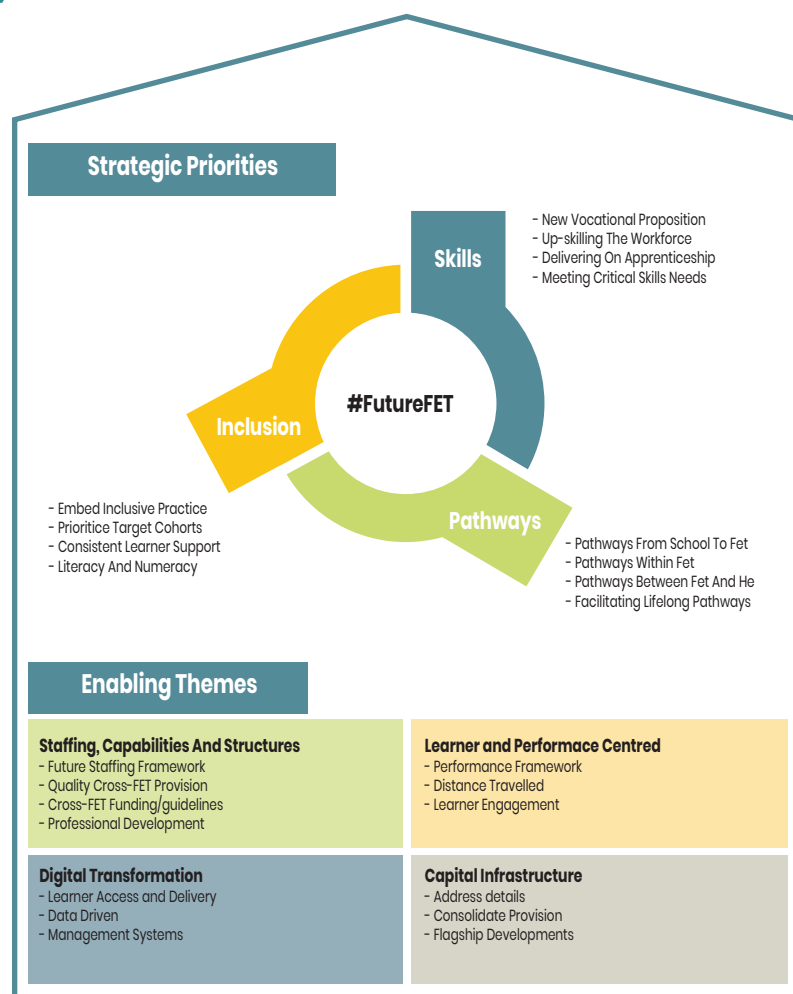
How different was the Covid-19 response?

To the seasoned FET veteran like me, the agility of the sector, its staff, and its learners to respond to economic demands and reform agendas is well documented and nothing new. So how was the Covid-19 response different? It was different because the sector, through the availability of economic stimuli and the drive by DFHERIS to rapidly engage with the scaffolding and strategic framework determined by SOLAS in Future FET, was strongly supported to change (see image).

This support and direction had to be solution-focused, as it was funded by the Exchequer, which was looking for measurable outcomes on how the strategic priorities of the strategy were achieved. What follows is a snapshot of the many different drivers of changes over the past 20 months.



Cecilia Munro
Principal of Ballyfermot
College of Further
Education



Future FET strategic framework (Source: SOLAS, 2020)

1. *Driving the skills agenda:* the change drivers being the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme and the Skills to Compete and Skills to Advance initiatives.
2. *Fostering inclusion:* the change drivers being the publication of Adult Literacy for Life 2021 and the enhanced SOLAS Fund for Students with Disabilities.
3. *Facilitating pathways to learning:* the change drivers being the placement of FET programmes, both post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs) and apprenticeships, on the CAO for the first time, starting on 5 November 2021.

Sean Aylward, chair of the SOLAS board, and Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, in their foreword to Future FET, highlighted that the 'central premise of the new strategy is that FET is for everyone and will serve as a major driver of both economic development and social cohesion'. Little did they know that the ambition set out for training and skills in the document

would be called upon in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021 as an essential pillar in helping people back to work after this pandemic:

Ireland's increasingly agile skills architecture will be increasingly responsive to demands. A high-quality FET sector is central to lifelong learning and to providing a mix of fast-track educational models which respond rapidly to skills needs. (Government of Ireland, 2021c, p. 22)

“ We have known for many years that FET must engage with digital transformation to achieve better outcomes for learners. ”

Be under no illusion, it is a tough and challenging environment for all who work in FET, particularly those who implement strategy and deliver on reform agendas through engaging with learners. While the bulk of delivery changes surfaced in the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector, all FET providers rose to the challenge.

In summary, in my estimation the Covid-19 pandemic drove the FET agenda forward about five years and has re-engineered new thinking on how we deliver further education and training. DFHERIS, in partnership with its agency, SOLAS, supported the enabling themes of the strategy during this pandemic. This support has been the catalyst for advancement and new ways of thinking.

Below I report on four enabling themes in the Future FET strategy: digital transformation; staffing, capabilities, and structures; capital infrastructure; and learner- and performance-centred.

Digital transformation

Digital transformation and its role in the economy has been well documented and is now central to Ireland's Economic Recovery 2021, Ireland's Pathways to Work Strategy 2021–2025, and DFHERIS's Statement of Strategy 2021–2023. We have known for many years that FET must engage with digital transformation to achieve better outcomes for learners.

As a direct result of Covid-19, learner access to education and training has been enhanced through the supply of laptops to FET centres. Our FET classrooms and training facilities are now more digitised, with both staff and learners having access to portable equipment, cloud-based software, and broadband.

The introduction of eduroam nationally is a change-maker. Eduroam, short for education roaming, is 'a Wi-Fi service which enables students, researchers and staff from participating institutions to securely access the internet at their college/university and whilst visiting other participating institutions' (HEAnet, 2021). Many of our FET colleges and centres are Higher Education and Research Network (HEAnet) members, and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is engaging in a pilot programme to connect FET learners to this service.

Staffing, capabilities, and structures

Throughout this pandemic, the response from FET staff has been outstanding. Staff have engaged with continuing professional development (CPD), new

ways of working, and digital transformation across all programmes and fields of learning. The biggest change has been the implementation of blended learning in FET programmes. The flexibility this brings to course delivery and new ways of working, which has been sought for years, is now firmly accepted by staff and learners. They have realised the benefits of working this way over the last academic year.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in 2018 published its guidelines on blended learning. The FET sector was slow to engage with these, as it lacked the capacity of resources and staff training and because few blended-learning courses for validation in FET were developed. Now, as a direct result of the emergency response to Covid-19, delivery opportunities are being harnessed and FET courses are being designed and validated for this delivery mode. For example, Infection Prevention and Control, a QQI level 5 special purpose award, is an essential qualification in a critical area for modern Ireland. This award, developed by City of Dublin ETB, is being delivered through blended learning modes across all ETBs.

“Staff and learner thinking have shifted during the pandemic, from the regular 100% face-to-face delivery to acceptance of blended learning as a delivery tool.”

Staff and learner thinking have shifted during the pandemic, from the regular 100% face-to-face delivery to acceptance of blended learning as a delivery tool. The pandemic has shown that blended-learning courses provide flexibility and opportunities for different ways of course delivery that suit both FET staff and learners.

Capital infrastructure

The lack of cohesive and sufficient capital budgets in FET has long been a talking point. The National Development Plan 2021–2030 allocated €100m in capital funding to FET to develop its resources, for example the FET college of the future and provision of apprenticeships and green skills. This investment comes at a time when the economy is clearly dependent on the sector to deliver learners with qualifications that can take the economy into the next decade and beyond.

During the pandemic, Louth Meath ETB (LMETB) launched its Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre as a result of combined funding from SOLAS and the Border Enterprise Development Fund. Obviously planned pre-pandemic, this centre of excellence seeks to bridge the skills gap, to educate and train learners in an employer-focused, innovative, and flexible way, and to provide talent for the manufacturing sector. Being future-focused, the centre sets about creating a talent pool qualified in essential skills that are in short supply and in demand in Ireland, such as robotics, cobotics (collaborative robotics), additive manufacturing, 3D printing, simulation technology, augmented reality, virtual reality, and cybersecurity.

Budget 2022, announced on 19 October 2021, listed a host of measures for additional capital investment of €65m in FET. This included €34m for apprenticeships and €22m to address the Green Skills Action programme that is essential to Ireland's future (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021). Capital investment in FET continues to be a key driver of

change in the sector. Learners who learn in a setting based on the modern working environment achieve better outcomes.

Learner- and performance-centred

The FET budget for 2021 is nearly one billion euros: €993m. This is a considerable investment. There is enormous pressure on the sector to make it count and to show that it is value for money. One way to do this is to analyse all the data and show how FET is making an impact on the economy, society, and the lives of its learners.

“The FET budget for 2021 is nearly one billion euros: €993m. This is a considerable investment and there is enormous pressure on the sector to make it count.”

The Skills and Labour Market Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS regularly produces National Skills Bulletins that analyse the data and create tangible metrics for the public, policymakers, and the sector to work from. These bulletins highlight where there is employment and where there is a shortage of talent to meet employment opportunities:

The analysis in the National Skills Bulletin aims to assist with meeting these challenges by detailing the outlook across many occupations. The identification of the type of people employed across these roles will assist with the direction of education and training interventions required over the coming months. This Bulletin forms a key evidence base to inform labour market policy decision as Ireland moves to a new phase in its recovery from the pandemic. (SOLAS, 2021, p. 3)

As a direct result of this data analysis, initiatives such as Skills to Compete and Skills to Advance were introduced in 2020. Skills to Compete supports those who have lost their jobs because of Covid-19 to re-enter the workforce. Skills to Advance equips workers with the skills to progress in their current job or to take advantage of new job opportunities.

Conclusion

The combined focus of the developments to support the strategic priorities and enabling themes in the FET Strategy during Covid-19 has put FET in the spotlight as one of the main drivers of economic recovery. All of us who work in FET have been given a fresh outlook on how we complete our FET business as a direct result of this pandemic.

Certain things have become possible that one or two years ago would not have been conceived. We are now in a time of transformation where we can offer much more accessible education using online resources and different technologies. (Brownlee, 2021, p. 2)

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NEW COURSE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH WORK AT GMT CASTLEBAR



Justin Kerr, Head of Department of Nursing, Health Science and Social Care, GMT Mayo.

"If you see yourself working with people from various backgrounds to respond to local identified needs, advocating when appropriate, lobbying for change, participating in social transformation, there is a new course at GMT Castlebar Campus that will interest you."

- Justin Kerr

The course includes professional practice placement in both community development and youth work settings throughout the programme.

<http://www.gmit.ie/nursing-health-science-and-social-care/bachelor-arts-honours-community-development-and-youth-work>

NCGE Vision for FET Guidance and Information Service

The opportunity now exists in Ireland to place the FET Guidance and Information Service at the heart of lifelong learning and to develop seamless, collaborative, and appropriate lifelong career guidance provision for everyone. This is achievable through consultation, collaboration, and cooperation among all the stakeholders involved, as this article outlines.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education's (NCGE) vision of career guidance in further education and training (FET) is founded on the principles and expertise in adult guidance across the range of FET provision. Whatever the final decisions on the FET college of the future or on developments in general tertiary education and training, the future of guidance in FET can be maximised, augmented, and informed by the experiences leading to the development of the sector, incorporating developments in career guidance nationally and globally, and reflecting significant considerations in the provision of information and guidance during the global pandemic.

What remains consistent are the imperatives of stakeholder communication, collaboration, cooperation, and professionalism, through which FET guidance and information service delivery can help drive the development of a dynamic and unique FET Guidance and Information Service for Ireland.

Definition of guidance

Guidance, in this context, is defined by the European Commission as a continuous process that:

enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences, and interests, to make educational, training, and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work, and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, guidance counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills.¹

As defined, guidance is not just the provision of online information or of one-to-one guidance



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counselling. Guidance must remain impartial and client-centred and must highlight *all* options in *all* institutions available to people. Guidance does not imply recruitment, or admissions services, because these operate at institutional level to encourage and support access to and enrolment in that institution.

In the context of FET Guidance and Information Services, we refer to the model of adult guidance to adults over 18, or over 16 if they left school early,² which has different legal and ethical practice obligations and can be informed by the adaptation of the NCGE post-primary Whole School Guidance Framework,³ with the individual adult, student, learner, or client central to the development process.

Policy context

It is vital to reflect on the legislation informing guidance provision in Ireland: the Education Act 1998.⁴ It informed the development of guidance models in adult education: the Adult Education Guidance Initiative pilot and services, now the Education and Training Boards' Adult Educational Guidance Service (ETB AEGS).

The Education Act is crucial to the development of the NCGE Whole School Guidance Framework, establishing a whole-school, collaborative approach to the delivery of career guidance counselling that is effective, reliable, and professionally robust. The Act has implications for FET, obliging 'centres of education' to provide students with 'access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices'.

The model of adult guidance service provision referred to in the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) FET Strategy 2014–2019, section 10,⁵ is the ETB AEGS model, incorporating impartial provision of information with professional guidance interventions. This model evolved since the publication of the Department's 2000 white paper 'Learning for Life'. Initially, the ETB AEGS began as pilot projects that informed and reflect the European standards outlined in the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network's (ELGPN) 'Effective quality assurance and evidence-based policy systems'.⁶ It is vital to note, however, that the ETB AEGS are just one element of the wider FET guidance landscape.

In the FET Strategy 2014–2019, section 10 includes the 'Vision for Integrated FET Guidance and Information Service'. It outlines how the strategy will be evaluated and includes the following aspiration:

Everybody who engages with FET, whether employed or unemployed or wishing to engage with FET for the purpose of learning, can access a high-quality career guidance, counselling and labour market information service.⁷

Integrated FET Guidance and Information Service has a significant contribution to make in building learner core competencies in the areas of learning-to-learn and career-management skills. As a result of engaging in adult guidance, people will acquire specific knowledge, skills, and

Integrated FET Guidance and Information Service has a significant contribution to make in building learner core competencies.

“ NCGE proposes that a Whole of FET Guidance and Information Service Framework has the potential to forge an innovative, dynamic, and client-centred FET Guidance and Information Service.

competencies that will help them participate and succeed in their education, training, and employment goals.

More recently, the 2020 SOLAS FET Strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning, states:

Critical to facilitating lifelong learning pathways is the pivotal role of ETBs in providing guidance on education, training, employment, and careers to all within their regions ... ensure that impartial guidance is available to all who seek it within the ETB region.⁸

The SOLAS Adult Literacy for Life Strategy 2021, under Pillar Four: Empower, cites the important role of guidance:

Person-centred Pathways: The adult guidance and information service ... within ETBs will play an important role in supporting and linking people to the supports needed. Ongoing guidance and information will be key to providing responsive and flexible progression learning pathways at whatever point in people's lifelong learning journey they are needed.⁹

In considering a FET Guidance and Information Service and its potential, it is limiting and outdated to reflect only on the environment of adult learning. The environment in which FET exists, in the context of tertiary education and of training systems, is one that encompasses all adults, communities, and society, with informed choice as a facilitator of citizenship, belonging, and purpose for everyone in Ireland. Of course, as a nation we are in the EU and share the vision of the global community for a free and fair society.

NCGE proposes that a Whole of FET Guidance and Information Service Framework has both the potential and the capacity to forge an innovative, dynamic, interdepartmental, integrated, accountable, and client-centred FET Guidance and Information Service.

The ETB AEGS, as established and professional adult guidance and information services, successfully blend a public-facing impartial service role with considerable in-programme support. It is vital now to build the connections across existing guidance counselling support in FET colleges of further education, Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, Youthreach / Community Training Centres (YR/CTCs), training centres, and apprenticeships.

The collaborative construction of FET Guidance and Information Services will need clarity of purpose and function, responsibilities, and connectivity that can be enhanced through national policy development, national and regional leadership, expert oversight, and the provision of supports such as supervision and professional development. A FET Guidance and Information Service provides an opportunity for ETBs to lead regional access to information and supports for applications for everyone, facilitating access to FET, higher education, apprenticeships, upskilling, career development, and emerging career-guidance needs.

What is imperative, and will demand consultation across the sectors, is to build understanding, knowledge, and trust among guidance professionals, and to promote guidance awareness for FET staff, for social, community, and welfare services, and, most significantly, for service users.

Critical to professional guidance provision is the Programme Recognition Framework (PRF) published by the DES in 2016.¹⁰ This document set out criteria and guidelines for providers of initial education programmes in guidance counselling whose graduates will work in guidance services in post-primary schools and FET. It also determined the subsequent national review of university programmes for guidance counselling qualifications – graduates are required to develop the competences to lead, plan, deliver, review, and evaluate the guidance service they offer to young people and adults. The PRF outlines the activities of guidance, thereby clarifying what guidance does and what a guidance service should deliver.

It is important, meanwhile, to remember that delivery of guidance services in many EU countries is often supplied through Public Employment Services (PES), implying an employment priority. The government's Pathways to Work Strategy 2021–2025 can be accelerated and enhanced through collaborative, cooperative, whole-of-government and interdepartmental approaches to service provision, harnessing existing expertise, referral systems, and collaborative activities at local level, to help everyone make informed choices about their education, training, and career at any point of their lives.¹¹

“ Delivery of guidance services in many EU countries is often supplied through Public Employment Services (PES), implying an employment priority. ”

Current range of guidance provision in FET

Guidance and Information Services in the FET sector provide impartial information on careers and education, and one-to-one and group guidance, which help people to make informed educational, career and life choices. FET Guidance and Information Services are provided to adults aged 18 and over, and to those over 16 who have left school early.

Currently there is no formal, nationally agreed structures for coordination or cooperation across the guidance services provided in FET, which include ETB AEGS, colleges of further education (CFEs), PLC programmes, YR/CTCs, ETB training centres, adult and community education centres funded by other government departments, Youth Information Services, the Back to Education Initiative, and prison services.

Useful learning from the ETB AEGS is the principle of the ‘guidance team’, which enables different levels of responsibility and requirements to be attached to FET Guidance and Information Service roles. The provision of guidance counselling in CFEs and PLCs was developed and resourced as an adaptation of the post-primary guidance counsellor role, while guidance counselling in YR/CTCs reflects the application by YR/CTC Advocates of the ‘wheel’ model.

Dedicated, appropriately qualified specialist roles outlined in a ‘whole-of-FET guidance team’ approach could be developed to mirror the

post-primary ‘whole-school student support team’ underpinning the whole-school guidance approach.

Guidance information, referrals, signposting: delivery, support

Key attributes of the ETB AEGS include the impartial, informed, integrated, networked role developed to date in the FET centres, in the community, in the region, and nationally. Improving understanding of what guidance does is a challenge, but it can be addressed by promoting understanding of the impartiality of FET Guidance and Information Services, engaging the public's trust, and, through informed choice, engaging with FET and HE.

“ For programme-based guidance in FET, it is vital to ensure connections with the employment sector. ”

Promoting and understanding the specialist role of FET Guidance and Information is improved through inputs to existing training for, and collaborations with, adult learning champions, justice and equality agents, mentors, recognition of prior learning (RPL) coordinators and practitioners, and mental health and other support services, to ensure that guidance is linked appropriately.

For programme-based guidance in FET, it is vital to ensure connections with the employment sector, for example through the Regional Skills Fora, ensuring access to and understanding of labour-market information and research available, and connecting to key curriculum areas to ensure the effective development of learning-to-learn and career-management skills.

Supporting digital access and digital, blended, and face-to-face FET Guidance and Information Service

The digital divide and society's increasing reliance on one-stop shops and digital platforms for dissemination of information, application processes, and services pose significant and ongoing issues for adults at risk of social or educational exclusion. This is evidenced across a wide range of community and educational supports on the ground and is noted in consultations for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) Adult Literacy for Life strategy. The pandemic has accelerated the need for technology-enhanced systems and service delivery, but the digital divide remains a challenge with implications for equity and accessibility.

By using existing expertise and ongoing development of information provision, using blended approaches to guidance support and delivery, and capitalising on existing evidence-gathering and system incorporation, the FET sector can be a leader in the provision of an innovative, collaborative, accessible, yet personalised FET Guidance and Information Service for all.

The FET Guidance and Information Service (GIS) can facilitate access and promote inclusion, diversity, equity, participation, progression, and engagement for all adults, but it must be underpinned by the principles and models of guidance outlined in the table below.

Model of FET Guidance and Information Service	
Principles	Systems and service delivery
Quality assurance (QA)	National and regional agreement on QA system informed by European and international standards in guidance provision Development of national guidance standards, guidelines for good practice, etc. Establishment of agreed career-management skills and career development modules to include competence development for all adults in areas of 'Developing myself', 'Developing my learning', 'My career path'
Practitioner training, qualifications Role descriptors Continuing professional development (CPD) and supervision	Agreed qualifications for guidance counsellors in accordance with Dept. of Education Programme-Recognition Framework; development of guidance-practitioner qualifications relevant to FET sector at NFQ levels 6 and 7 as appropriate Clarifications of all guidance roles Provision of national and regional CPD and supervision for guidance counsellors/practitioners
Research Data- and evidence-gathering	Informed by academic research in career guidance/career development nationally and internationally Agreed system in place to support national and regional data-gathering for evidence, monitoring, and evaluations of FET GIS, with built-in interoperability with Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) and other relevant national systems Ensuring record and evidence of guidance provision to general public, <i>and</i> FET-registered learners, <i>and</i> those progressing to higher education or apprenticeship
Strategic planning	Dedicated strategic FET GIS planning integrated as a key element of ETB strategic planning nationally and regionally Collaboration, networking, and referral at regional or local level with relevant government agencies, Intreo, NGOs, support agencies, etc., as appropriate
National and regional developments	Developments agreed nationally and regionally with stakeholders in accordance with government policy, ETBs, higher education institutions, and Regional Skills Fora requirements National Advisory Group established with all relevant stakeholders, including DFHERIS, Department of Social Protection (DSP), SOLAS, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), NCGE, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) staff, client, and employer representative groups, to agree national policy and strategy

Integrated, collaborative, regional planning	Coordinated, integrated provision at regional level to ensure collaboration of all FET-based guidance services, to ensure public-facing and in-course/in-programme-based guidance planning delivery, reporting, and evaluation	
Resources and staffing	Resources, budgets, and staffing agreed at national and regional levels to achieve strategic objectives, including: Regional/ETB guidance coordinator to support development of the coordinated 'whole-of-FET guidance' approach at ETB level, including coordination of service delivery in training centres Qualified guidance counsellors to deliver one-to-one and group guidance Appropriately trained guidance information staff, to ensure provision of accurate, impartial information to the public, registered learners, and online	
Guidance and Information Service (GIS)	Delivered where and how?	Systems and service delivery (informed by the Department of Education's Programme Recognition Framework 'Activities of Guidance Counsellors')
Pre-entry	Online information, using various multimedia systems and walk-in service to FET GIS; delivered on-site into course and programmes	Accessible national, regional, and local careers and education information accessible to everyone interested in FET, HE, apprenticeships, and EU options Information on RPL/NARIC application processes Introducing career and education research Referral to appropriate services, e.g., literacy, adult education, FET providers, HE access offices Access to labour-market information Self-referral and self-assessment career guidance service
Entry	On-site in FET GIS Online delivery where possible	Support for applications to education and career options; support for RPL/NARIC processes; establish personal career and/or education goals, and identify and achieve plans; develop career and education research and management skills; liaise with DSP to ensure eligibility, etc. Psychometric assessment for aptitude, interest, learning styles One-to-one guidance counselling to consider personal experiences and decision-making; referral and advocacy as appropriate Access to, understanding of, and integration of labour-market information
Ongoing	On-site in FET GIS Online delivery where possible On-site in FET course or programme, in collaboration with coordinators	Agreed at ETB level and locally and delivered in collaboration with and in support of managers, coordinators, or tutors Group guidance modules or information sessions scheduled into course timetable Development of career-management skills: career development modules to include career or education research skills Group and personal guidance counselling to support individual career or education decision-making and referrals where appropriate Psychometric assessment for aptitude, interest, learning styles Standardised work experience across FET, to include career guidance modules, interventions, reflection Access to, understanding of, and integration of labour-market information into personal career or education planning

Pre-exit	On-site in FET GIS Online delivery where possible On-site in FET course or programme, in collaboration with coordinators	In collaboration with managers, coordinators, or tutors Group guidance or information sessions scheduled into course timetable Career development planning and job application processes, CV or Europass development, interview skills One-to-one guidance counselling to review and set personal career or education planning and application processes
Exit	On-site in FET GIS Online delivery where possible On-site in FET course or programme, in collaboration with coordinators	Considering personal career and education plans and support for transitions to next stage of education, training, work, etc. Client tracking and follow-up, offer of reconnect at further stages of adult lifelong learning or work transitions

Conclusion

The provision of impartial information and guidance to the wider public, and the delivery of career-management skills development and guidance counselling supports through FET programmes, underpinned by international principles of guidance service provision, are achievable through consultation, collaboration, and cooperation of all the stakeholders involved.

The development of an ETB-based, integrated, publicly available, accessible, impartial, and person-centred FET Guidance and Information Service, with clarity of purpose and accountability, can serve a range of government, FET, and HE objectives by providing services that facilitate informed choices for all in lifelong education and training.

The opportunity now exists to truly place the FET Guidance and Information Service at the heart of lifelong learning in Ireland and to develop seamless, collaborative, cooperative, useful, and appropriate lifelong career guidance provision for all.

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This article explores the growing interest in micro-credentials in Ireland and internationally. These credentials or micro-qualifications are increasingly attractive to learners, funders, and policymakers because they can be highly focused on known areas of specific skill shortage and can be obtained in a relatively short time. They have taken on greater importance as they are seen to have a role to play in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Micro-credentials are a means of recognising comparatively small amounts of learning. They are attractive to learners, employers, funders, and policymakers because they can be highly focused on known areas of specific skills shortage and can be obtained in a relatively short time. Micro-credentials are sometimes referred to as alternative credentials; micro- or nano-degrees; open, digital, or e-badges; or even micro-masters. Some are accredited and are part of or aligned to national qualification frameworks, and some are non-accredited.

Currently there is no common understanding or agreed national or European definition of micro-credentials. This causes some concern that micro-credentials can lead to fragmentation of the qualifications system or even the possibility of a parallel credential system. Recent efforts to address this include a UNESCO webinar on moving towards a common language on micro-credentials (UNESCO, 2021). The webinar noted that the 'lack of a common definition, shared and understood by all users, has a number of negative implications, particularly when it comes to the transparency, portability, and cross-border recognition of micro-credentials'.

The value that micro-credentials, and indeed other qualifications, have for stakeholders is linked to the trust given to the credential and to the provider who offers it. It is also linked to the 'recognition' mechanisms between the education and training system and the labour market.

Labour market relevance is a key driver for micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are not a new concept: awards, badges, and certificates to mark achievements have been issued by organisations in industry, business, and education, and by volunteering bodies. Learners want evidence of having acquired new or additional knowledge and skills as a response to the demands of the labour market, while employers are keen to ensure that

Micro-credentials: Hope or Hype?

A look at the growing interest in and opportunities offered by micro-credentials in Ireland and internationally



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employees can access new skills, in flexible and convenient ways, as the business requires.

Micro-credentials offer learners the opportunities to learn in a way and at a time that suits their diverse and complex lifestyles. At the same time, providers are adapting and updating their courses to provide greater flexibility for learners, including more innovative and diverse modes of delivery. The ability to stack micro-credentials towards a larger qualification is attractive to learners, providers, and employers.

A major driver in the development of micro-credentials has been the Covid-19 pandemic. The significant number of people who have become unemployed or furloughed since March 2020 has generated a market for upskilling or re-skilling for new jobs, particularly away from sectors hardest hit by the pandemic.

“Currently there is no common understanding or agreed national or European definition of micro-credentials.”

Whereas micro-credentials were once mainly the province of private online education providers, over the past 18 months all education providers, public and private, have been forced into the online teaching and learning space. Many are finding that their clients are now less concerned about proximity to a campus and may indeed be unwilling or unable to commit the time required to complete, say, a traditional master's degree.

Micro-credentials and higher education

Europe

Across Europe, educational authorities and institutions are keen to ensure that there is quality oversight over micro-credentials (ENQA, 2021). Efforts are in place to ensure standardised and consistent approaches, particularly in the context of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with an emphasis on complementing frameworks rather than proposing alternative (and possibly contradictory or confusing) processes.

In April 2021, the European Commission launched a public consultation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. It sought to collect ideas for the development of a common definition for micro-credentials, European Union (EU) standards for their quality and transparency, and the next steps to be taken at the institutional, national, and EU levels (European Commission, 2021a).

Recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to accelerate the green and digital transitions also require individuals to upskill or re-skill. However, without common standards ensuring quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition, and portability, the Commission concluded that micro-credentials cannot reach their full potential. It is therefore seeking to develop a common definition and European standards for micro-credentials independent from the awarding body, building on existing tools as far as possible. The Commission intends to prepare a

Council Recommendation on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability by the end of 2021.

Micro-credentials were referenced in the 2020 communiqué of the ministers of education in the EHEA to respond to learners' needs for upskilling and re-skilling (Ministers for Higher Education, 2020). A key development in the EHEA is the MICROBOL project – Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments – a two-year project, commenced in 2020, co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to policy reform (European Commission, 2021b). The project focuses primarily on micro-credentials provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) or in conjunction with them, but also touches upon those provided entirely by companies or non-profit organisations, the system of 'open badges', and other bits of 'micro'-learning that might be recognised by HEIs. The project will explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used or need to be adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials.

The new version of Europass, launched by the European Commission in 2020, includes a digitally signed credentials framework and platform that provides an environment in which to address the challenges related to quality assurance, mutual trust, and recognition of micro-credentials. The platform will facilitate the uploading of all types of qualifications, accredited and non-accredited. Learners will be able to evidence, demonstrate, and share all their varied credentials (degrees, diplomas, micro-credentials) in digital portfolios.

A recent study by the European University Association (Cirlan and Loukkola, 2020) noted that the rising cost of university education has been a key driver particularly in the US, Australia, and New Zealand, where the phenomenon of alternative credentials has been more present. But in many European countries, where tuition fees are low or non-existent, the difference of price for students taking micro-credentials is not big, while the cost for a micro-credential offered outside formal degree programmes can be higher.

United States

Many of the developments in micro-credentials emanate from the United States. Among the reasons for this are concern at the runaway costs of the traditional four-year residential university degree and the prevalence in the market of several large online providers such as Coursera, edX, and Udacity (Hechinger Report, 2020).

In an article for the BBC, Purbasari Horton (2020) examined whether micro-credentials could replace or merely supplement traditional degrees in the US. Some micro-credentials popular in the US, such as so-called 'coding bootcamps', might have been developed to fill the gaps that universities cannot, and in turn might be perceived in relevant sectors as good alternatives to traditional degrees.

But according to Sean Gallagher of Northeastern University, that does not mean that traditional university degrees do not have significant value

“Many of the developments in micro-credentials emanate from the United States.”

“Sean Gallagher's survey on the use of educational credentials in hiring found that 'college and university degrees are still valued and demanded in the job market'.”

(Gallagher, 2018). His survey on the use of educational credentials in hiring found that 'college and university degrees are still valued and demanded in the job market' and 'continue to give their earners economic returns'. While he found that more organisations were moving towards skills-based hiring, many applicants were already degree-holders who were using micro-credentials to supplement their basic qualification, rather than looking to stack certificates or bootcamp credentials as an alternative. Even when looking at coding bootcamps, these tended to be favoured by graduates looking for a shorter version of a master's degree.

United Kingdom

A recent study by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK (QAA, 2021) concluded that a significant barrier to the increased take-up of micro-credentials in the UK relates to the funding system. A key recommendation from the Augar Report (Augar Report, 2019) would 'provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years' worth of post-18 education to use over their lifetime'. However, this will require a significant change to the system of student finance, not yet approved by the UK Treasury. Without this funding, there are doubts about whether learners who have not yet had an opportunity to engage successfully in higher education or are from lower socio-economic backgrounds will take up micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials and training

Europe

While the role of micro-credentials in higher education has received much attention, their influence on further and continuing training in the labour market is less understood. In 2020, Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) launched a study on the role of micro-credentials in upskilling or re-skilling in a fast-changing work environment (Cedefop, 2020). It seeks to examine how the technology-driven growth in micro-credentials and online badges interacts with existing certification systems serving enterprises, sectors, and technology areas. The study will look at whether the increased attention to micro-credentials is linked mainly to their digital delivery form or to a genuine change in the way we recognise knowledge, skills, and competences.

Australia

The review of the Australian Qualifications Framework in 2019 explored the importance of micro-credentials and recommended that policy guidelines be developed to allow micro-credentials to be recognised for credit (Australian Government, 2019). A more recent review by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) analysed the role of micro-credentials in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia (Palmer, 2021). These reviews highlighted how micro-credentials can support opportunities for flexible learning and training and could help

modernise Australia's training landscape, as part of broader reform work in the VET system (Australian Government, 2019). NCVER noted how much of the development of micro-credentials in training related to the response to Covid-19, with a range of new skills being identified to respond to areas of critical workforce training and skills needs, particularly related to infection-control skills in retail, food handling, transport, logistics, and health.

New Zealand

New Zealand was one of the first countries to look at placing micro-credentials as an integral part of its regulated education and training system. In 2018, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority developed a process for the approval of tertiary education organisations wishing to offer regulated micro-credentials (NZQA, 2018). Once approved by NZQA, a micro-credential is published on a micro-credential register (NZQA, 2021). Micro-credentials in New Zealand can stack to qualifications. Programmes leading to qualifications may include micro-credentials as components of learning. The micro-credential application must state which qualification the micro-credential would be 'stacked' towards.

“The recognition of a micro-credential in the NFQ gives some assurance to funders, learners, and employers that programmes are well designed and delivered and assessed to high standards.”

Micro-credentials in Ireland

Background

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003. The recognition of a micro-credential in the NFQ gives some assurance to funders, learners, and employers that programmes are well designed and delivered and assessed to high standards. Awards in the NFQ must be assigned a level, and the programme must be judged to meet the learning outcomes relevant to that level.

However, not all micro-credentials need be included in the NFQ to be recognised and useful. Qualifications as small as 1 ECTS (25–30 hours of total learner effort) are in use. Their credit can be accumulated towards NFQ qualifications through procedures operated by providers for the recognition of prior learning. Also, smaller micro-credentials can be bundled or stacked to construct a compound award eligible to be included in the NFQ.

In a report on the views of recruitment professionals in Ireland on qualifications, QQI (2019) noted that of over 5,000 training and education programmes delivered by Skillnet Network in 2017, more than half were non-formal and offered industry-specific micro-credentials.

One of the main drivers in increasing the availability of micro-credentials in Irish higher education has been through the financial incentive of the government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) (HEA, 2020). The HCI is a response to the targets outlined in the National Skills Strategy, Technology Skills 2022, and other government strategies. It seeks to enable the higher

education system to respond rapidly to changes in both skills requirements and technology.

One of the main projects funded under the HCI is a five-year (2020–2025), €12.3 million multi-campus micro-credentials project led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) with funding drawn from the National Training Fund (IUA, 2020). Learners will be able to choose to undertake a micro-credential as a standalone award or stack their learning towards a larger award. Under the project, Ireland aims to be the first European country to establish a coherent national framework for quality-assured and accredited micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials and QQI

QQI is actively engaged in several European activities and initiatives, including the MICROBOL project, related to micro-credentials to promote coherent, robust, and consistent approaches. In June 2020, QQI published a Green Paper on the Qualifications System (QQI, 2020a) whose purpose is to begin a national conversation on FET and HE qualifications, including the value and usage of non-major awards now and into the future.

In November 2020, Ireland presented its NFQ Updated EQF Referencing and QF-EHEA Self-Certification Report to the EQF-Advisory Group. The original 2003 NFQ Award Type Descriptors were viewed as appropriate and visionary. The Irish NFQ is being cited by our European partners as a good example of a flexible framework that is designed to meet a diverse range of needs in a robust, quality-assured context.

“Ireland aims to be the first European country to establish a coherent national framework for quality-assured and accredited micro-credentials.”

Also in June 2020, QQI launched the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) (QQI, 2020b). This statutory listing of all FET and HE qualifications included in the NFQ will provide greater visibility on the range and type of qualifications offered and available in the state, including small qualifications and micro-credentials. As of September 2021, there are 1,383 courses according to the IRQ in the level 6–9 NFQ range with 30 ECTS credits or less.

QQI currently has national standards for 1,500 FET 'component awards' linked with course elements of 50 hours and upwards. Many of these components are stand-alone and can be regarded as VET micro-credentials. Micro-credentials in FET are also offered here by well-known UK vocational awarding bodies, such as City and Guilds. The 2019 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) Act, when the relevant section is commenced, will allow QQI to include such awards in the NFQ.

A recent QQI paper (QQI, 2021) provides an early exploration, starting with QQI certification data for 2014–2020, on how best to examine the state of play in the supply and uptake of higher-education micro-credentials in Ireland.

Private HEIs have shown their flexibility and responsiveness to calls to the national Springboard upskilling initiative over the past decade. They have competed successfully with bigger, longer-established public sector

institutions. QQI has supported this work through external validation, monitoring, and review of these programmes. In some cases, the programmes were put together by providers from existing modules that were part of previously validated programmes.

However, in all cases, there must be a determination that the resulting programme is coherent and allows learners to acquire the knowledge, skill, and competence required for an award at the desired level in the NFQ. QQI has had to refuse validation on occasions when expert panels advised that the 'pick-and-mix' programme proposed did not meet real labour market needs.

In summer 2020, when public funding was made available for higher education and training (HET) 'micro-credentials', QQI undertook a pilot process for validation of those programmes to which this term has been applied (QQI, 2020c). With the cooperation of private HET providers, a process was developed whereby the providers could submit, for a streamlined validation process, stand-alone programmes of 5–30 ECTS which led to QQI special purpose awards. All these programmes comprised single modules drawn from previously validated programmes of larger volume and ranged from 5 to 20 ECTS. Since the programmes had already been through a larger validation process, QQI applied a streamlined model for evaluation while ensuring that the fundamentals of the validation process were maintained.

There is continued demand from the provider sector that the model for micro-credentials be extended further to include new programmes with no connection to a previously validated programme and modification of modules which had been taken from previously validated programmes.

The way forward

In her keynote address at the QAA Quality Insights conference in 2021, Beverley Oliver concluded that 'by 2025, depending on how we proceed, micro-credentials will be seen as a fad that disappointed us, or a key step towards reimagining lifelong learning for thriving and surviving'.

A recent paper (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021) contends that micro-credentials are 'gig credentials for the gig economy' and that 'rather than presenting new opportunities for social inclusion and access to education, they contribute to the privatisation of education by unbundling the curriculum and blurring the line between public and private provision in higher education'. They further argue that micro-credentials 'accelerate the transfer of the costs of employment preparation, induction, and progression from governments and employers to individuals.'

Credibility will remain a challenge for micro-credentials, even if they are credit-bearing awards from a higher education provider. They will involve a significantly different learner experience. There has been much media coverage in the last 18 months about the impact of the pandemic on the student experience. One conclusion has been that the initial emergency pivot to online learning was a huge challenge for staff but may have been less of an issue for students. What has affected students was the loss of access to campus and support facilities and that wider traditional student experience.

There is a strongly held view that there is value from students having a largely uninterrupted, linear, and immersive experience of higher education. A higher education experience comprising small units of learning such as micro-credentials, gained over a long period, is very different from the traditional residential campus experience.

In Ireland, renewed national interest in micro-credentials provides the opportunity for further engagement and dialogue on standards and quality. QQI plans in 2021 to establish the Irish Quality and Qualifications Forum (IQQF) as a stakeholder consultation and advisory group on qualifications matters. QQI also plans to start a national dialogue on the themes and topics outlined in the Green Paper on the Qualifications System (QQI, 2020a).

QQI is committed to working with providers to ensure the streamlining of the QA processes and improving the speed to market of desired micro-credentials. As part of our new Statement of Strategy 2022–24, we commit to building learner and public understanding of micro-credentials and where they fit in the NFQ.

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Higher Education

Professor Kerstin Mey was appointed President of University of Limerick on 8 October 2021, following an open competition and subsequent approval from the university's Governing Authority.

Prior to that, she had served as Interim President at UL from 1 September 2020. She is also a former Vice President of Academic Affairs and Student Engagement.

The Tertiary Education Landscape



Jim Breslin

Secretary General at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

This article offers an overview of tertiary education in Ireland from a contemporary governmental perspective. It sets out the department's strategic vision, the legislative picture, the development of technological universities, and the broader landscape of further and higher education in the country.

Structure and strategy

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in summer 2020 elevated Irish tertiary education and research to a central and more visible position, both nationally and internationally. I was delighted to get the opportunity to lead the establishment of this government department and to shape the contribution it will make to the future of our country.

Notwithstanding the momentous challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have made good progress. The response from the sector and the appetite to work in a collaborative and unified way have been instrumental in this progress.

The support received from colleagues in other departments has also been crucial. In particular, colleagues in the Department of Education, led by Seán Ó Foghlú as secretary general, have been enormously supportive and generous in helping our new, fledgling organisation to become operational quickly. Both departments are highly committed to ongoing collaboration on the many areas of shared policy interest.

DFHERIS's first Statement of Strategy, for 2021–2023, was submitted to government and published in March 2021. We set out six strategic goals:

- talent – develop talent and skill
- innovation – promote research, knowledge, and innovation
- inclusion – support learning for all
- international – succeed on world stage
- governance – good governance to enhance quality
- capacity – department fit for purpose.

The Statement of Strategy, building on the original decision by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin to set up the new department, recognises the importance of further and higher education and research to the

economy and to society. From the outset, Minister Simon Harris has been very clear that we are both an economic and a social department – driving future economic prosperity, but making sure that no one is left behind.

The establishment of the department has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Unquestionably the pandemic has brought huge challenges and setbacks for our sector. But in keeping tertiary education operating safely, albeit remotely, the sector has proven how determined, flexible, and innovative it is in meeting the needs of learners. And in the carefully planned return to campuses in September 2021, the recognition of the unique contribution of colleges as places of engagement has never been greater.

The students, academic and administrative staff, and public servants who worked so hard to make this possible deserve enormous praise. This work has been characterised by close and ongoing engagement among all stakeholders and shared leadership.

Even as we all grappled with an unprecedented national crisis, the department was also quietly commencing its work towards further developing our further and higher education sector as a high-performing, world-class system. In doing so we are fortunate to build upon the many achievements already realised in recent years.

Legislation and reform

As we look to drive our ambitions forward, we are seeking to ensure that the fundamental building blocks of governance and funding are firmly in place. That is why the government is committed to the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971.

There have been enormous changes to the higher education sector since this legislation was enacted 50 years ago. We have seen an increase in the number of students from around 20,000 to over 200,000 today. There has been a major expansion in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs). Higher education has become more accessible to all sectors of society, and more adaptable to meeting the State's social, economic, and labour market needs.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report from the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was published in September 2021, and the department looks forward to supporting the Minister in advancing the legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The model informing the proposed legislation is one of co-regulation. This recognises the importance of autonomy and agility on the part of HEIs, coupled with appropriate accountability.

The legislation will allow institutions to meet their responsibilities and accountabilities in line with contemporary best practice. It will provide the Higher Education Authority (HEA) with clarity on its overall role in planning and managing at the system level and, where necessary, intervening proportionately to address issues where individual institutions may need additional supports.

There has been extensive consultation with stakeholders throughout the development of this legislation. The legislation will recognise that autonomy and flexibility are essential features of HEIs, but also that this must be matched with transparent governance and accountability to students, stakeholders, and the public.

I would emphasise that nothing in the legislation will impinge on the academic freedom of HEIs or their staff. This is a core tenet which will continue to be enshrined in legislation. Institutions will continue to be supported to do what they do best – delivering excellence in education and research and providing places of engagement and insight to support a flourishing democratic society.

I would emphasise that nothing in the legislation will impinge on the academic freedom of HEIs or their staff. This is a core tenet which will continue to be enshrined in legislation.

The work undertaken under the auspices of the EU's Reform Directorate on the future funding and sustainability of Ireland's higher education system has now been completed. In his recent Budget speech, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, noted that his colleague Minister Harris will shortly bring a report on the future funding of the sector to government for consideration and that government will ensure that its decisions on future funding for this sector reflect its vital role as a cornerstone of our economic model. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on an implementation process for the significant reforms recommended in the EU-funded study and look forward to establishing this process with the sector and wider stakeholders in 2022.

Technological universities

It is also worth highlighting the considerable work under way to further the development of technological universities (TUs), so that they make a distinct contribution to our higher education system and contribute to balanced regional development and other national goals.

For the past 50 years, the regional technical colleges and then the institutes of technology (IoTs) provided vocational, technical, technological, and professional skills and qualifications to generations of students. The strengths of the sector reside in strong links with local and regional enterprise and communities, and a practical, applied-research-informed approach to teaching and learning.

These institutions provide pathways into higher education which, through geography or circumstance, may not otherwise have been within the reach of many young (and not so young) people. We want to nurture and build on these strengths in the new TUs.

The TUs will have a distinct role and purpose in the overall higher education sector – ensuring that the diversity of learners' needs and interests is met by a breadth of institutions. This applies across the entire range of the National Framework of Qualifications, from level 6 to level 10, with apprenticeships as a continuing vital component.

TUs are rooted in their communities, and the collaboration that this facilitates presents a key opportunity. In October 2019 the TU Research Network (TURN) high-level advisory group, comprising the president of TU Dublin and all presidents of HEIs then seeking TU status and chaired by independent UK higher education transformation expert Professor Phil Gummert, produced its seminal report ‘Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity’.

It details the case for TUs to lead the delivery of national strategic objectives for regional socio-economic development, higher education access, research capacity-building, and skills progression. On foot of the TURN report, government announced in Budget 2020 the provision of €90 million over the following three years under a TU Transformation Fund to support IoTs to jointly achieve TU designation and to further the advancement of established TUs.

Approval has been secured for an additional, separate allocation of €40 million up to 2024 for specified TU activity under the government’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In 2021 the department provided €9 million in additional funding to Science Foundation Ireland, which now operates under the aegis of the department, to establish a new Frontiers for Partnership Awards programme that will support increased research capacity in TUs and IoTs. Work is also in train on applications for additional TU-research-related funding under Operational Programmes co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

The strides made since the enactment of the Technological Universities Act 2018 mean that in just three years, in place of 14 IoTs of varying sizes we will have five TUs of significant scale and strength and two IoTs.

Three TUs are now fully operational. The first to be established was TU Dublin in January 2019, followed by Munster TU in January 2021. Most recently, we have seen the newest, TU of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, established on 1 October 2021. In 2022, the work of the Connacht–Ulster Alliance of Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), IT Sligo, and Letterkenny IT, and the TU of south-east Ireland consortium of Waterford IT and IT Carlow, will see two more established.

The new Housing for All strategy commits government to legislating to allow for TUs to borrow from the Housing Finance Agency to deliver purpose-built student accommodation, the shortage of which is currently a challenge to furthering access to TUs and across the higher education sector. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this priority issue.

Government and DFHERIS, working with the HEA, is fully committed to ensuring that technological universities continue to be supported over the period ahead, so that all parts of the country can benefit from a regional, multi-campus TU with the opportunity to enable greater access to high-quality higher education, improve skills and lifelong learning, and increase research and innovation output as engines of regional and national specialisation and competitiveness.

“The strengths of the (IoT) sector reside in strong links with local and regional enterprise and communities, and a practical, applied-research-informed approach to teaching and learning.”

Broader landscape

It is essential that our entire sector – both further and higher education – leads the way in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in a world that is rapidly changing, and that it provides the country with the range of talent needed to address critical challenges and respond to the quickening pace of globalisation and digitisation.

The latter has been accelerated by the pandemic. Earlier this year we produced Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year strategy addressing not just literacy and numeracy but digital literacy, all of which are now fundamental requirements for someone fully engaging in society and realising their full potential.

The development of apprenticeships is a key priority, including in providing the skills needed to tackle the housing and climate crises. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make them accessible to employers and learners, with a target of 10,000 registrations a year by 2025. There are now 62 apprenticeship programmes, including craft apprenticeships but extending into many new areas, such as finance, ICT, biopharma, engineering, logistics, hospitality, and arboriculture.

Meanwhile, the CAO website has been redesigned so that prospective students can clearly see that higher education is not the only option after the Leaving Cert, and that further education and apprenticeships offer exciting career possibilities.

We have launched a new website, the Right Course, which is a one-stop shop for those looking to upskill, train, or re-skill. It is aimed at a wide range of people, including school leavers, those recently unemployed or looking to change employment, employees who want to upskill in their field, and employers seeking to develop their workforce.

Lifelong learning will be an essential feature of how we equip ourselves for the pace of change that we will continue to experience. It will be an important component of an enhanced further and higher education sector in the years to come.

In conclusion, this is a really exciting time for further and higher education in Ireland, and it is now up to all of us to take this opportunity and deliver for the people of Ireland. Establishing a new government department in the midst of a global pandemic has not been without its challenges, but we are well on the road in our ambition to lead a sector that is innovative, adaptive, and inclusive and is supported to contribute in the best way possible to Ireland’s social, economic, and cultural development.

This article reflects on the emergence of technological universities in Ireland and the significant changes in the higher-education landscape in 2021. It considers the distinctive role that the sector will play in the years ahead, the strengths resulting from its capacity for collaboration, and some of the challenges that it faces.

New horizons

An education yearbook serves a number of purposes: a digest, the catalyst to an inclusive conversation, the opportunity to focus a particular topic. But it also serves to document, to act as a record, and to provide to future generations of readers a contemporaneous insight into the major concerns of the day.

Doubtless any review of 2021 will feature the impact of Covid-19 and the manner in which all of education managed to negotiate that challenge, and, through the heroic and innovative work of all concerned, maintain provision, albeit with a necessarily reduced level of student experience. But the fact of the global pandemic should not disguise the appreciable advances that were realised, not least in the landscape of higher education. Indeed, it can be argued that the impact on modes of working actually facilitated a pace of change that was unlikely to have occurred had there not been such a pressure.

It is likely that 2021 will be viewed as a most significant year for higher education in Ireland. It has seen the formal launch of two new universities, Munster Technological University and the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest. Two remaining applications, from the consortium in the south-east and along the north-western seaboard, have been evaluated by international peers, and their reports are on the minister's desk at the time of writing.

This represents an unprecedented realignment of the higher-education landscape and a significant increase in potential. Most critically, for current and prospective learners, it provides access to the highest quality of education and training in their region. The high-quality and strategically focused research concentration will increase the potential for regional innovation.

The advances this year are consonant with the commitment to invest in technological universities

A Changing Landscape for Higher Education



Dr Joseph Ryan
CEO of Technological
Higher Education
Association

(TUs) which is provided for in the National Development Plan 2021–2030. As that document states:

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 continues to provide the framework for far-reaching changes in the higher education landscape. One of the most significant changes is the development of multi-campus technological universities, an agenda which is central to regional development ambitions and is now well advanced.¹

The plan continues:

TUs have a key role to play in driving the rebalancing of regional growth and development, as envisaged in the NPF. Investments in the new and planned multi-campus TUs will strengthen their role as anchors of enterprise, will further develop research and innovation capabilities that are aligned with regional specialisation, and will help attract and retain talent in the regions.²

“ It is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.

The National Development Plan speaks to the distinctive role set out for the technological sector which was documented in the roadmap as originally elucidated in 2011. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 had expounded the vision for the development and evolution of institutes of technology into a smaller number of stronger amalgamated institutes. The change proposed was unprecedented, and it is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.

That these new entities would be distinctive was clearly adumbrated in the National Strategy, in the legislation (Act no. 3/2018 – Technological Universities Act 2018), and in the subsequent Technological University Research Network (TURN) report.³ TURN was established in February 2019 by the Department of Education and Skills to examine and report on how emerging TUs could achieve their sectoral and national strategic objectives.

It was an inclusive process, externally chaired and including representatives from the presiding department, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), TUs – existing or intending – and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and it issued the final report in October 2019. It proposes that the introduction of TUs into the higher education landscape in Ireland is a bold and important step and that the concept is distinctive in its rootedness in regional and local communities and economies, reaching out internationally from those roots and drawing international education and research practices directly back into the regions.

These were to be new entities with the confidence to build on the excellent heritage of achievement established through the institutes of technology. This was positioned in the TURN report as a new university sector with the power to substantially enhance the capacity of the higher-education system while also responding to government priorities and societal challenges. The link to broader national policy objectives is unambiguously stated:

The core mission and purpose of TUs is closely aligned to meeting a number of key National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) and Public Investment Priorities contained in Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018–2027. The NDP specifically highlights the role of TUs in meeting the NSO for deepening the talent pool for regional sectoral clusters and driving applied research and innovation.⁴

The distinguishing character of a technological university was admirably captured by both Josephine Feehily and Professor Vincent Cunnane, respectively chair and president of TUS: Midlands Midwest, in their addresses at the formal launch of the new university in Athlone on 1 October 2021. Both speakers emphasised the sense of place and the access agenda that are central to the democratising influence of the sector. Indeed, Dr Feehily noted that what has attracted her to this sector is its characteristic and consistent responsiveness to community.

The challenges

It has been a long road, but the advances in recent years attest to the remarkable work of sectoral staff, management, and governors working with the fullest support of government and its agencies. But we must also be realistic, and there are challenges for the nascent sector, three of which are outlined below.

First, experience teaches that we are slaves to perception. The challenge was to form new institutions reflecting the state-change required of them by government while remaining faithful to the distinctive ethos of the technological sector. The TURN report requires that ‘TUs must also work together to respond to Government policy’.⁵ The membership agreed that:

They need to work together to build the reputation of this new university sector since they share responsibility for that reputation nationally and internationally. TUs that are being formed in more or less the same period have an opportunity to identify and collaborate on achieving mutual projects to ensure the most efficient use of resources and the widest impact for investment, particularly in the initial phases of TU development.⁶

Technological universities sit within a larger construct. That architecture realises their distinctive contribution as their key strength. Having the confidence to retain and proclaim that discrete character while also operating as an acknowledged and respected university is the challenge. What is a new concept for Ireland is an established currency abroad.

Second, we are in the embryonic stage. As in the passage cited above, the initial phase of TU development requires unity and considerable support. The TURN report was vital in that it fuelled key seed investment in the system, some €90 million over three years. It will be necessary to build the case to extend this support if these new institutions are to deliver on the objectives set for them by government.

Allied to this is the task of determining a sustainable funding model for higher education. At the time of writing, Europe has delivered its consideration of the options set out in the Expert Group on Future Funding

for Higher Education, led by Peter Cassells in 2016, and Minister Simon Harris TD has committed to settle the question of underinvestment in third-level education.

There is shared agreement on the role of higher education as the catalyst for economic activity, for social cohesion, for job creation, and for enhanced quality of life. We equally share the understanding that our people are our key asset, and that investment in human capital is essential for national competitiveness. It is critical for the sector as a whole that this matter be foregrounded, debated, and determined in the months ahead.

A third challenge is that of agreeing a working contract that can meet the ambitions of staff and serve the expanded mission of the technological sector. A process is under way on this through the HEA and with the support of key stakeholders and input from the OECD. It will take time to work through the detail, but the ambition would be to have a new contractual construct available in 2022. This endeavour will include determinations on a new researcher career development and employment framework.

Conclusion

This article has consciously eschewed the temptation to focus on the impact of Covid-19. But it has noted that the altered working modes have facilitated acceleration of certain engagements and have led many in the education community to consider the learnings from persevering through the age of Covid-19 and the benefits attaching to new methods of working. For learners, the advent of technological universities brings increasing opportunity.

The Covid-19 experience has also reemphasised the importance of, and possibilities attendant on, digital connectivity through the extended regions covered by the new TUs. These new modes for a new time will present opportunities to learners to progress beyond former boundaries. Such a facility is also essential in preparing future generations for what is already an increasingly digital society and economy.

Given the emphasis that national policy places on balanced regional development and the sustenance of local communities, and noting the salient role expected of TUs to support this goal, we can affirm with some confidence that 2021 has been a most significant year and one with the seed of considerable promise for the years ahead.

ENDNOTES

1. Government of Ireland, Project Ireland 2040: National Development Plan 2021–2030, p. 98.
2. Ibid, p. 99.
3. Connectedness and Collaboration through Connectivity (October 2019). <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/12/Report-of-the-TU-Research-Network-2019.pdf>.
4. Ibid., p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 19.
6. Ibid., p. 19.

This article reflects on how nurse education moved away from the traditional 'hospital-based' schools of nursing to a system of universal degree-level education for all nurses in higher education.

Background

With 2021 designated as the Year of the Nurse and Midwife, it is timely to examine where nurse education has come from and how it will meet healthcare challenges in the future. Few would argue that nurses do not require an education, particularly given the vital role that nurses have had in patient care throughout the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Yet twenty-five years ago, the suggestion that nurses should receive a degree-level education was met with incredulity and hostility. I recall receiving letters from members of the public expressing concerns that nurses would become uncaring if they received a degree. There were also media articles querying why nurses needed a degree since they mainly did washing and toileting. It is striking that there was so much open hostility to nurses being educated, since they provide 24/7 care, they make up 50% of the health workforce, and better-educated nurses contribute to better patient outcomes (Aiken et al., 2017).

Nearly two decades ago, Ireland moved away from the traditional 'hospital-based' schools of nursing to a system of universal degree-level education for all nurses in higher education. How this all came about can be traced back to 1994, when the system of nurse training underwent considerable change with the establishment of links with higher education and the introduction of a pilot scheme for a Diploma in Nursing (An Bord Altranais, 1994).

Following this, the Commission on Nursing resulted in the introduction of a four-year degree as the sole route of entry to practice (Government of Ireland, 1998). Although nursing sought entry to higher education on educational grounds, the driving force behind the move was pragmatic and fiscal, as the Commission report emerged from an industrial-relations conflict that involved direct strike action by nurses (Fealy and McNamara, 2007).

Nurse Education Over the Years

Reflecting on the past and meeting the challenges of the future



Prof Imelda Coyne

Professor in Children's Nursing and Co-Director of the Trinity Research in Childhood Centre, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin

The move to degree-level nursing education in 2002 was an exciting but also challenging time for nurse education, as it involved significant disruption for nurse teachers employed in schools in the hospitals. I remember this time vividly, as I helped lead the integration of six schools of nursing into higher education at Dublin City University and the accreditation of the curriculum for this new four-year degree programme. In 2006, after extensive consultation, a new direct-entry undergraduate children's and general integrated nursing degree programme also began, which put the education of children's nurses on equal footing with that of nurses from other disciplines.

Approval of third-level status for nursing programmes moved nursing to an all-graduate profession, which signalled far-reaching changes for nurses and nursing. In the past, student nurses functioned as 'workers', whose learning needs were subservient to organisational needs (Fallon et al., 2018). In contrast, the degree programme combines theory with clinical practice placements in each year, and students are supernumerary till the final internship in fourth year.

Research shows that direct patient care delivered by nurses with bachelor degrees leads to improved patient outcomes and less morbidity (Aiken et al., 2017).

Nurses are educated to be critical thinkers and lifelong learners and are now on equal standing in interdisciplinary teams. Although differing models of nurse preparation exist internationally, in Ireland it continues to be a graduate qualification preparing nurses to work in many settings and to be leaders. For example, many nurses in the role of clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners lead in specialist areas of healthcare, contribute to better patient care, and improve patient satisfaction (Coyne et al., 2016).

Impact on patient care and outcomes

Ensuring that nursing is an all-graduate level of education is essential, because empirical research shows that direct patient care delivered by nurses with bachelor degrees leads to improved patient outcomes and less morbidity (Aiken et al., 2017). The association between higher registered nurses (RN) staffing (educational level and number) and better patient and nurse outcomes is well documented. Having nurses with degree-level education in a 1:6 patient ratio will prevent approximately 3,500 deaths per year (Bruyneel et al., 2015; Ball et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2019).

Improvements to work environments, nurse staffing ratios, and the educational composition of nurses have been shown to lead to improved quality of care and patient safety (Sloane et al., 2018). Furthermore, when healthcare organisations reduce the number of graduate nurses by adding other categories of assistive personnel, this may contribute to preventable deaths, erode quality and safety of hospital care, and contribute to hospital nurse shortages (Aiken et al., 2017). There is considerable evidence of the benefits to patients of deploying well-educated nurses to provide care in adequately staffed units, yet much of this evidence is not being implemented (Rafferty, 2018).

Workforce challenges

With healthcare changing rapidly worldwide, it is timely to consider the key challenges that face nursing and the healthcare and education system. The future will pose new global challenges that will affect health and healthcare, potentially including further infections of pandemic proportions like Covid-19. According to Catton (2020), 'The future resilience of healthcare services will depend on having sufficient numbers of nurses who are adequately resourced to face the coming challenges.' So adequate numbers of skilled nurses will be critical to successfully tackling healthcare challenges, but currently there is an estimated global shortage of nearly 6 million nurses (WHO, 2020).

This problem is projected to only get worse with an ageing workforce and challenges in recruiting and retaining nurses (WHO, 2016; Van den Heede et al., 2020). Without enough nurses, healthcare procedures and operations will be restricted, and hospital units may have to close. This is a recognised global challenge that will have a profound impact on future healthcare. The three key areas to address nursing shortages are recruitment, retention, and redesign.

Way forward

Society is changing and becoming more diverse, with many different cultures, ethnicities, traditions, and family configurations. The pace of technological advancement is unprecedented and has the potential to transform how the health services and people manage their health and wellbeing. In relation to redesign, the Department of Health's (2019) Sláintecare report recognises the huge role that nurses play in health promotion and disease prevention. The action plan includes expanding nursing roles, moving care to community where possible, a new nurses contract, and the development and introduction of a new model of nursing and midwifery. Nursing education is constantly adapting and innovating so that nurses have the competence, skill, and knowledge that they use every day to provide patient-centred care and to save lives.

“The future resilience of healthcare services will depend on having sufficient numbers of nurses who are adequately resourced to face the coming challenges.”

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Winners of Foundation Scholarship Award

Nursing and Midwifery Students at Trinity College Dublin, some of the Winners of the Foundation Scholarship Award. This highly prestigious distinction requires students to display a breadth of knowledge beyond their standard coursework.



The transition to higher education changed dramatically for the class of 2020. Researchers at Maynooth University studied the first-year undergraduate experience in this challenging time. This article reports on several important insights from the student responses. The pandemic has dramatically changed these students' introduction to and experience of higher education, both academically and socially. The findings presented here offer insights relevant to all higher-education settings.

In September 2020, just over 46,000 first-year students commenced higher education. These students, unlike previous cohorts, experienced the transition during a pandemic, and a majority began their undergraduate degree experience fully online. During the academic year 2020–21, a team of researchers at Maynooth University (MU) undertook an in-depth case study into the first-year undergraduate experience during this challenging time. This article reports on important insights that emerged from the student responses.

Much has been written about the pandemic and its negative influence on young people's mental health. But our understanding of how first-year students experienced the transition to higher education during this time is limited. This research is timely, because despite substantial literature on the economic returns to higher education, far less is known about the social and academic experience of university life from the students' perspective, unlike in other institutional contexts (Arum and Roska, 2010; Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Soria et al., 2021).

This article reports on findings from the first wave of an online survey conducted at the end of semester one with first-year undergraduate students at Maynooth University, aimed at capturing their unique experience of university life and distance learning during the pandemic. MU is an interesting case study because it has the most diverse student intake: the highest share of entrants with a disability (15% compared to the Irish university average of 13%) and the highest share of entrants from target socio-economic groups (29% compared to 24%) (HEA, 2020).

The survey sought to generate a better understanding of university life and the difficulties that first-year students faced during the pandemic and to make recommendations for future actions. It was distributed to all first-year students during

The First-Year University Experience During a Pandemic



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December 2020 and January 2021, and it contained both closed and open-ended questions; 22% (727) of the first-year cohort completed the survey. Though the data collection yielded a marginal over-representation of female, high-attaining, and mature students, the results were reweighted to make them representative of the first-year population. The survey specifically explored five areas, three of which are discussed here:

- The transition to higher education
- Adapting to an online environment
- Learning and belonging in the online environment.

The transition to higher education

The transition to higher education is known to be difficult, and many young people face considerable stress in a points-driven admissions system. Unlike previous cohorts, the first years of 2020–21 did not sit the Leaving Certificate, which was replaced by a process of calculated grades. Over two-thirds of those who came through that process agreed that the changes to Leaving Cert assessment affected their wellbeing and made them feel stressed and anxious about transitioning to university. Higher levels of agreement came from female, working-class, and first-generation students and those who secured lower points than their counterparts through calculated grades. It is likely that these first years have experienced more anxiety than previous cohorts on entry to higher education.

“ Few felt that their ‘final year of education was good preparation for university’.

Considerable effort has been made by the Transitions Group in Ireland to improve the transition between school and university and the links between them, a task made more difficult by the pandemic. Our survey found that a minority of first-year students at MU felt they were still not ready to choose a university course. This was particularly evident among those with the lowest calculated grades. Previous research has identified that some young people, particularly those from disadvantaged contexts, express concern about an absence of information on post-school choices and course options (McCoy et al., 2014); this may have been compounded during the pandemic.

First-year students were divided on the statements ‘The subjects at university build on previous study at school’ and ‘There are clear links between school and university’. Few felt that their ‘final year of education was good preparation for university’. A considerable minority would have preferred to start university with a general first year before choosing a specified course.

These findings replicate those from a nationally representative study of school-leavers who had transitioned to higher education (McCoy et al., 2014). It is likely that the pandemic and calculated grades have affected how students perceived their university readiness. There is also clear social stratification in the structure of opportunity, given that some under-represented student groups are more likely to feel less prepared than groups more typically found in higher education.

When asked about the experience of university versus school, the students were more positive, despite the pandemic. A majority agreed that studying at university is more demanding and also more fulfilling, even during a

pandemic. Those with more resources experienced a smaller 'transition gap', meaning that their transition to university was smoother.

Adapting to an online environment

The key challenge for these students was in adapting to the online environment, which, though it offers many advantages, such as technological and personal innovations, also presents many challenges (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Besser et al., 2020; Garip et al., 2020). Key objectives of the research were to assess the extent to which first-year students felt they could adapt to the online environment, and to identify the characteristics of students most challenged by this shift.

Given the diversity of the first-year student intake at MU, not all students had previous experience of online or distance learning. This was particularly the case for mature students and those who had transitioned into university from further education. When students were asked how they felt they had adapted to online or distance learning, 'not at all well' was the response from a substantial minority of those without experience of this form of learning and from a substantial minority of HEAR/DARE entrants.

Many of the barriers for first-year students were adaptive rather than technical, reflecting findings in the US (Soria et al., 2021). For example, the greatest challenge they experienced was a lack of motivation for remote learning. Fewer cited 'a lack of clear expectations for online learning from lecturing staff', 'a lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment', or 'feelings of an inability to learn effectively in an online format'. Multivariate analyses showed that all else being equal, male and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades were more likely to experience more challenges. A majority cited a lack of interaction with other students as a key barrier, reflecting the importance of relational learning at higher education.

A majority cited a lack of interaction with other students as a key barrier, reflecting the importance of relational learning at higher education.

The online experience also presented opportunities, with a majority of the first-year students indicating positive aspects. Some felt they could now fit learning into their lives more easily, reflecting the findings of the pre-pandemic INDEX survey (NFETLHE, 2020). Positive aspects included having more time to do college work, having more preparation for classes, feeling more productive in completing assignments, and attending classes more regularly. However, all else being equal, first-generation students and those with caring responsibilities were less likely to feel this way.

Learning and belonging online

While staff adapted quickly to teaching online, that environment placed greater emphasis on self-directed learning for students. The less structured a learning environment is, the more self-regulation is required to master several competing tasks and to achieve individual goals (Arum et al., 2021). Our survey did not measure self-regulation or mastery per se, but it did ask students about their use of goal-setting for learning. Goal-setting and self-regulated learning are important for student success (Davis & Hadwin

2021). Goal-setting was common among the majority of our first-year students, but less likely among first-generation and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades, perhaps reflecting the challenge of a less structured learning environment and limited familiarity with the expectations of learning at higher education.

The more adaptable that students are, the more they can relate to learning online and develop a sense of belonging (Besser et al., 2020), which also is important for higher-education retention. In the online environment, a minority of students had developed a sense of belonging to the university by the end of the first semester. Of great concern is that those with the lowest calculated grades or who experienced more obstacles to online learning were less likely to feel they belong to the university community, while those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way.

A majority of students felt that their relationships with staff and students were more positive than negative. Those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way about both types of relationships, but first-generation and mature students and students with disabilities were less likely.

Conclusion

The pandemic has dramatically changed the introduction to higher education for this cohort of first-year students. The transition to and experience of higher education remain socially stratified, and these patterns are likely to have been compounded during the pandemic despite an increase in higher-education places. Lower levels of information, resources, and knowledge about higher education and subject content, and an ability to adapt to online learning, are likely to have a bearing on the future experience of university life, both academically and socially.

As this group progress to second year, ongoing actions are required to improve and support their academic and social experience. Though these findings relate to one cohort in a specific university setting, they offer important insights that are relevant to all higher-education settings.

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Brace - the free social rehabilitation platform



Conor Motyer, Founder of **Brace**. Conor developed the platform following a serious sporting injury that he sustained and during which he experienced first-hand the mental toll involved in the injury recovery and rehabilitation process. Photo: Nick Bradshaw, Fotonic

Brace is a free social rehabilitation platform that enables people to take control of their injury recovery journey in a social and supported way.

Brace helps you to manage the physical and mental aspects of the injury recovery process through injury tracking and exercise management, experiential insights into injury recovery, and social and community support.

www.bracesocial.com

The beta version of the **Brace** app is available for free download on both the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

Assessment Choices Post-Covid-19

How Covid-19 challenged and changed assessment – perhaps permanently

Covid-19 required higher education institutions to change their assessment practices, particularly in relation to summative, time-constrained, closed-book examinations. With various alternative assessment approaches having been used successfully during the pandemic, the question now is whether to return to pre-pandemic assessment practices or to continue to embrace and develop the changes introduced. We have the opportunity and responsibility to choose well.

Introduction

When the then-Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced a national lockdown on 12 March 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19, higher education institutions (HEIs) were forced to change their practices overnight. The first and most obvious change required teaching and learning to move from physical classrooms to remote online delivery. What was less clear was how the pandemic would challenge and change higher-education assessment practices.

For many years before Covid-19, HEIs had embraced the central importance of assessment. Nationally accredited programmes were designed around minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs), with constituent modules delivering related minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs). Programme assessment strategies routinely ensured the *constructive alignment* of assessment practices (Biggs & Tang, 2011), encompassing assessment of, as, and for learning (NFETL, 2017a).

This provided continuity of alignment from individual module assessments, to MIMLOs and MIPLOs, and to discipline-specific and generic national award standards of knowledge, skills, and competences on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Before Covid-19, higher-education assessment seemed to have reached a stage of mature development, offering comprehensive, scaffolded, well-considered, robust, and reliable assessment systems.

The arrival of Covid-19 disrupted many forms of learning and formative assessment. Classrooms, labs, and studios were abandoned to ensure the health and safety of learners and teachers, requiring learning and assessment opportunities to be entirely recreated, often within the limits of online Zoom sessions and breakout rooms. This compromise proved particularly limiting



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in creative disciplines, where learners tried to complete practical assignments such as film-making that required close group work. Specific assessment challenges also arose in teaching and healthcare programmes, where opportunities for workplace learning and assessment were severely curtailed.

Covid-19's effect on summative assessments affected most programme disciplines, as it was no longer possible to gather hundreds of learners into examination halls to sit traditional closed-book, time-constrained exams. Unlike secondary education, where the State chose to replace the Leaving Certificate exams with teacher-assessed grades, in general, HEIs chose to remain as close as possible to the prescribed assessment by moving to online exams.

Online assessment

Online exams have been used for many years, for example by professional regulatory bodies in accountancy, and for the State's driver theory test. These require learners to present to test centre facilities with preconfigured computers, where the learners' computer usage is closely monitored throughout their test. Covid-19 restrictions precluded these options, because learners could not be gathered safely into test centres.

Proctored online remote exams allow learners to take exams from remote locations, typically using their own computer. Online invigilators monitor the learners throughout the exam using the learners' webcams. More sophisticated systems are configured to take control of the learners' computers, restricting their access to test-related software resources during the test.

The cost and availability of proctored online remote exam services presented challenges for HEIs, as demand during Covid-19 far exceeded supply. The technology that was required to allow learners' computers to be remotely restricted also generally exceeded their internet broadband capacities for uploading. While invigilators could monitor learners throughout their exams using the learners' webcams or phone cameras, the closed-book nature of exams had to be substituted with open-book or 'open-source' examinations.

While open-book and open-source exams have been used for many years in exam hall settings, their sudden imposition in an online format as a substitute for the previously prescribed exam-hall closed-book exam presented challenges for learners and teachers alike.

For teaching staff, the move meant they had to reimagine and redesign their exam on the basis that learners would have access to open-source material throughout the test. Teaching staff were supported by the institutions' teaching, learning, and assessment departments and nationally by the resources provided by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (NFETL, 2017b).

In order to ensure the continued approval of the learners' awards throughout the pandemic, HEIs were given freedom to use alternative assessments and

to implement appropriate emergency contingency arrangements agreed with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2020).

For many learners, the prospect of doing exams online was scary. Learners raised various concerns about their lack of experience of doing exams online; their computer, laptop, or tablet resources; their typing speeds; the time constraints involved; and their broadband speeds. To allay their fears, institutions organised mock exam sessions online, allowing learners to practise under no-stakes conditions. To allow for different typing abilities, institutions extended their scheduled exam times to allow for additional settling-in and uploading time. Institutions also retained the option for learners to complete their exam using pen and paper, and to upload scans or photographs of their completed scripts within the allocated time.

More significantly, to encourage learners to make the leap towards online exams, and in line with national and international developments, HEIs adopted various forms of 'no detriment' policies. These assured learners that regardless of their performance in online exams, they could repeat the exams later without limiting the grades available to them.

Collectively, the supports, encouragement, and assurances given to learners were highly effective in managing a successful transition to online exams by the summer of 2020. In particular, there was no evidence of any increase in learner requests for deferrals. Indeed, for a brief period in June 2020, there was an expectation of a full return to on-campus provision in the autumn, and a sense that things would return to normal.

As Covid-19 continued to present further waves of infection, with different variants of the virus threatening public safety, higher-education teaching and learning remained largely online apart from a brief reprise before Christmas 2020. This resulted in online exams, initially adopted under emergency contingency arrangements, continuing throughout the entire 2020–21 academic year.

Future assessment

Eighteen months from the start of the pandemic, as HEIs face into 2021–22, the external environment has once again been transformed. Thanks to the development and roll-out of vaccines, learners and teachers can again look forward to enjoying an on-campus learning experience.

Higher education, having learnt to adapt and transform teaching, learning, and assessment practices during Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns, now faces the question of to what extent it should return to pre-Covid-19 norms and how many of its practices during Covid-19 it should retain.

The choices ahead for assessment strategies are many and varied, with each having its advocates and detractors. Some teachers and learners may long to return to the certainty of the pre-Covid-19 days, when time-constrained exams offered trusted standards of measuring attainment and protection from plagiarism and collusion.

Others will point to the tendency for closed-book exams to emphasise rote learning and recall rather than assessing higher-order learning,

their limited suitability to the needs of particular learners, and their poor accommodation of universal design for learning (UDL) principles.

All will concede that gathering people into rooms and having them write with a pen and paper for hours at a time, while removing all available support resources, is at the very least artificial and contrived. All accept that it does not reflect real-life situations in which learners, as graduates, are expected to apply the knowledge, skills, and competences they've learnt on their programmes.

The future of assessment practices post-Covid-19 will depend on the choices made by HEIs. Learners on film programmes are likely to embrace the return of group work, and those on teaching and healthcare programmes will welcome the return of work placements. However, the return to on-campus, closed-book, time-constrained exams for learners from other disciplines need not be inevitable.

As we enter the 2021–22 academic year, teachers in higher education are actively re-evaluating and fundamentally challenging the merit of their previously prescribed or chosen assessments. If learners on music-production programmes can be assessed on the basis of their music compositions, and fashion designers on their collections, how might learners on more traditional programmes in business and computing have similar opportunities for authentic assessments instead of closed-book, time-constrained exams?

Higher-education learners are also reflecting on how they wish to be assessed. In particular, learners in the later stages of degree programmes, who have completed two years of 'open-source' exams, are already petitioning their faculties and academic councils to ensure they do not have to undertake closed-book exams for the first time as part of their award. Such requests warrant detailed consideration.

Rather than automatically returning to the same-old pre-Covid-19 assessment practices, higher-education teachers and learners now have the opportunity and responsibility to choose which way to proceed from the many authentic and diverse forms of alternative assessments available. Their challenge is to reimagine and repurpose assessments anew, to suit an altogether changed and exciting post-Covid-19 world.

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Women Leaders in Irish Higher Education

Reflections on recent progress and the challenges of sustaining it

This short article reflects on recent and current women leaders in Irish higher education, as we mark the end of the first year in post of the first woman president of an Irish university and the coming into post this year of three more. It also flags some of the challenges yet to be met and the vigilance required to maintain the progress made on gender equality in the sector over the past several years.

Introduction

It seems apt to be writing this short article on female leadership in the higher education (HE) sector as we draw towards the end of the first year in post of the first woman appointed as president in an Irish university. Prof. Kerstin Mey was appointed interim president of the University of Limerick (UL) in July 2020. It is also an appropriate moment to mark the appointment of Prof. Maggie Cusack as the first president of the newly created Munster Technological University; the commencement in post of Prof. Linda Doyle, the first woman provost of Trinity College Dublin; and the appointment of Prof. Eeva Leinonen, who took up the post of president of Maynooth University in October 2021.

Moving, finally, from one of the few countries in Europe never to have appointed a woman as president of a university, it is positive to see the progress that now gives us four women university leaders out of ten. It should be acknowledged that the institutes of technology have embraced women presidents well before any of our universities; the percentage here, however, has remained modest, at 18% as of December 2020 (HEA, 2021).

Leadership

I have had the privilege to lead in a variety of roles over my career, in both healthcare and education. In Irish HE I was the first woman appointed as full professor and head of school in Dublin City University (DCU), and the first woman – and only person to date – to hold the combined role of deputy president and registrar in DCU. I also held the first vice presidency for equality and diversity in the Irish HE sector, a role from which I retired this year. None of these roles would have been possible had my husband not supported me by becoming the main carer for our two children.

Leadership, in my view, means providing the vision, resources, models, and other supports required to enable and empower one's team to deliver and achieve to the best of their capacity. An effective



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(retired)

leader must engage actively, humanely, courageously, respectfully, and humbly with all relevant stakeholders. Leadership also requires enthusiasm, energy, and active personal delivery of key aspects of the agenda.

In Irish HE, while it almost defies belief that it has taken 428 years to appoint a woman as president of one of our universities, it is heartening to see that Kerstin Mey's appointment in UL last year is not a once-off event. However, ensuring a sustainable cohort of senior women across our higher-education system who have the opportunities to move into professorships or senior leadership roles will require planning, nurturing, and robust monitoring on an ongoing basis.

Professors Kerstin Mey, Maggie Cusack, Linda Doyle, and Eeva Leinonen may have finally broken through this particular Irish 'glass ceiling', but it is important that we not be deluded, by the presence of these four leading lights, into believing that we have, as a sector, solved our gender equality and gendered leadership problems.

Women leading in higher education

One does not have to be a university or institute president to lead in higher education. However, in order to lead effectively, one needs vision and the ability to inspire, build confidence in, and enable a realisation of that vision – often while working through significant challenges. Equality of opportunity for women in higher education, including opportunities to access senior academic and leadership roles, has emerged as a significant challenge and opportunity for leadership in Irish HE over the past decade or so.

NUI Galway became 'first mover' on this agenda. Impelled to act, in light of the painful and damaging fallout generated by the loss of the Sheehy Skeffington gender equality case in 2014, NUI Galway appointed Prof. Jane Grimson, former vice provost of Trinity College, to chair a task force in gender equality, which reported in May 2016. Its 24 recommendations included the appointment of the first vice president of equality and diversity in the Irish HE system – only the second such post in Europe – to ensure that the task force recommendations would be implemented.

The Grimson report, as it is known locally, provided the blueprint for the first two gender-equality action plans implemented in NUI Galway, taking us to autumn 2021 (Grimson et al., 2016). Jane Grimson's leadership of the task force, and the excellent report produced, have had a profoundly positive effect, both directly and indirectly, on the experience of women in NUI Galway.

Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn consulted widely as she chaired and finalised the HEA (Higher Education Authority) Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions published in June 2016 (HEA, 2016). This later review produced recommendations not only for Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), many of which mirrored those in the Grimson report, but also for the HEA itself, for research funding bodies, and for the Department of Education and Skills. The implementation of its recommendations has impacted positively on the environment and opportunities for women across the Irish HE sector.

In February 2021, as part of institutional renewal of the Athena SWAN Bronze award, colleagues in NUI Galway were polled on perceived changes in opportunities for women over the past four years: see Figure 1.

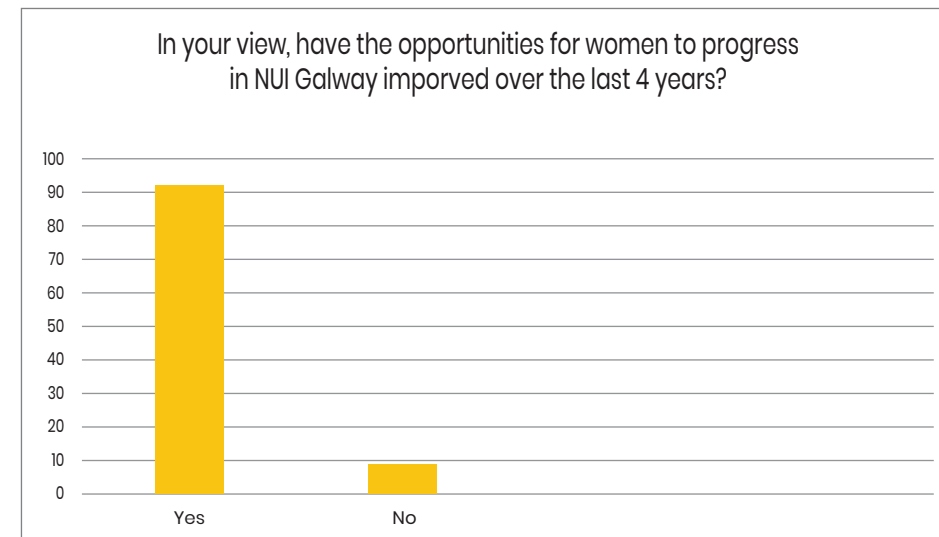


Figure 1: Response to question on opportunities for women – Town Hall Interactive Poll

It is now established policy and practice in NUI Galway, and in many of our HEIs, that all committees, working groups, boards, and panels at all levels in the university comprise at least 40% men and 40% women. This is key for the visibility and role modelling of women in Irish higher education, just as it is key for gaining the types of experience required for access to promotion, management, and leadership opportunities.

NUI Galway promotions and recruitment campaigns since 2016 have improved the proportion of women at senior lecturer grade from 33% to 46%, and at the personal professor grade from 16% to 28%. Overall, women currently represent 23.7% of the professoriate, up from 15% in 2016. See Figure 2.

Commitment and sustainability

This progress has all taken committed leadership, and much of the agenda has been led by women – both in our HEIs and sectorally. As we have seen, for example, the 2016 HEA review was led by Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, and in 2018 Minister Mitchell O'Connor instituted the Gender Equality Action Plan, inclusive of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative posts, thus keeping gender equality and the dearth of women in senior and leadership positions on the HEA agenda (Flynn & Ryan, 2020). It has also taken commitment from both institutional and departmental leadership teams – men and women.

This leadership and commitment must continue if progress to date is to increase and become sustainable. International evidence and experience on the ground indicate that without continuing leadership, monitoring, and holding key actors to account, we quickly revert to type, and the gains made

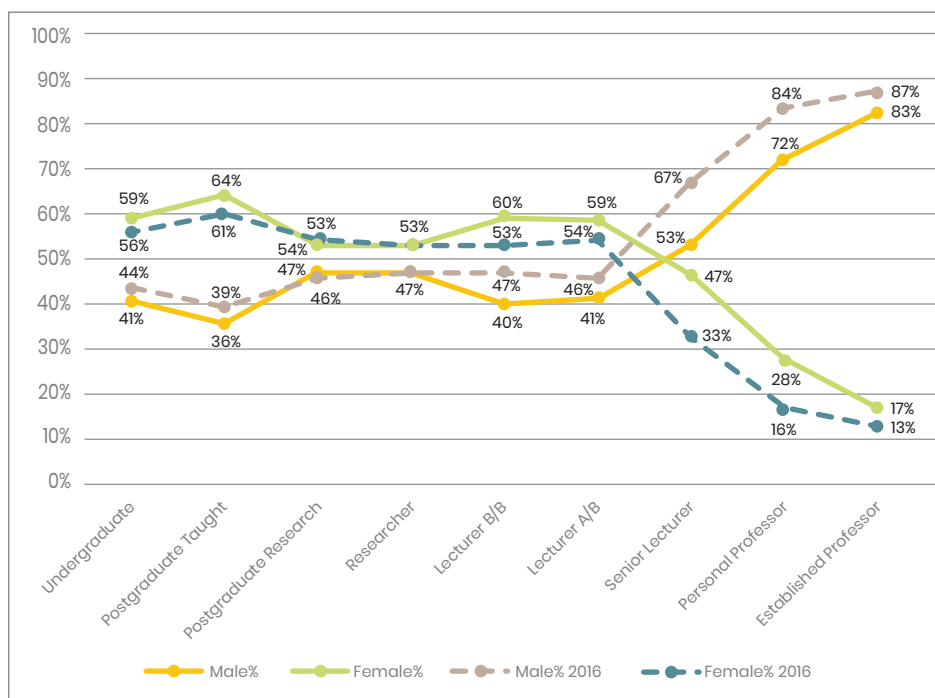


Figure 2: Academic career pipeline of all staff and students (2016 dashed line, 2020 solid line)

on gender equality can unravel rapidly. Hence the increasing concern, internationally, about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women in the workforce and on progress on gender equality in general.

Covid-19 has presented extraordinary challenges for colleagues – particularly those with caring responsibilities – across higher education and many other sectors. In the NUI Galway Covid-19 staff survey in June 2020, more female (47%) than male academics (31%) ranked caring responsibilities as their top challenge.

In light of this reality, research on the impact of caring on careers in HE, particularly women's careers, and my own experience of leadership roles in Irish HE, it behoves leaders in Irish HE to consider in some depth whether we wish to continue with the model of 'careless institutions' (Lynch, 2010). Their conclusions will have profound impacts on the future careers of women in Irish higher education, including the ability of women to gain and function in leadership roles in the sector. Refusing to engage in such consideration will have an equally profound effect.

Leaders of the Irish higher education sector were, until this decade, apparently completely oblivious to structural inequalities and to the exclusion and squandering of the leadership potential of up to 50% of its population across the diverse range of activities and services provided by the sector. Such an approach to the future leadership of a sector, where approximately 60% of the student body and over 50% of staff are women, is neither morally acceptable nor sustainable if the sector is to continue to flourish through this century.

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Four female leading lights in Higher Education



Professor Kerstin Mey
President of University of Limerick



Professor Maggie Cusack
President of Munster Technological University



Professor Eeva Leinonen
President of Maynooth University



Professor Linda Doyle
President and Provost of Trinity College Dublin



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

The National University of Ireland is a federal University with over 400,000 graduates across the world.

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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 (including IMI,
Irish Management Institute)



Maynooth University
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



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)



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This article provides an overview and summary analysis of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education (HE) in Ireland to date. It introduces the new National RPL in HE Project, whose vision is to make RPL an integral part of HE. It looks at why RPL is important for Irish higher education, and what actions are being planned to embed it systemically. RPL is a powerful resource that supports HE to progress a range of strategic objectives and makes access to lifelong learning a reality for many.

Introduction

The National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project is a four-year collaboration between the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA), encompassing 19 publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) and funded through the Human Capital Initiative pillar 3. The project seeks to extend what has already been achieved in HEIs and with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), as well as in the further education and training (FET) sector and through existing fora such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Practitioner Network.

Our vision is to make RPL an integral and vibrant part of a more flexible and inclusive higher education sector, one that presents lifelong learning opportunities of discernible value to learners, enterprise, and society in general. The project has two core beliefs: that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it, and that we should not require learners to relearn things they already know.

Reframing RPL as a powerful resource for higher education, rather than a burden, will be critical to our success. This article provides an overview and summary analysis of RPL in HE in Ireland to date and seeks to address two key questions: Why is RPL important for HE, and what actions are being planned in the new national project to embed RPL systemically in the policies, practices, and systems of participating HEIs?

RPL in higher education in Ireland – good, in parts

The expansion of arrangements for RPL has been included as an objective in national and European education policy for several years, most explicitly in the context of an overall vision of a

Enhancing the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Why and How?

Making the case for RPL as a powerful resource for Irish higher education



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“ In Ireland, RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

society where lifelong learning is the norm (e.g., NQAI, 2005; European Commission, 2008). RPL makes invisible learning visible and thus ‘makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large ... [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market’ (OECD, 2004).

In Ireland, since the adoption of outcomes-based definitions of qualifications in the development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NQAI, 2003), RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning (formal, non-formal, or informal) that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

Formal learning is learning that has already been certified in an education system; non-formal learning is learning acquired through planned activities that does not result in formal certification (e.g., in-house work training or MOOCs), while informal learning is learning acquired through everyday activities, often unplanned and unintentional (e.g., on-the-job learning or learning through volunteer activities).

In higher education, RPL may be used for:

- access to a programme
- advanced academic standing for entry to a programme beyond year 1
- exemptions or credit for a module or a number of modules
- a full academic award.

Irish HEIs have been engaged in RPL activities for many years. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) report on RPL in HE reveals progressive development and excellent examples of innovative practice (Goggin et al., 2015). It also reveals, however, that the availability of RPL to learners is geographically uneven, fragmented, and difficult to navigate for both learners and staff.

At a sectoral level, the approach to RPL may be described as piecemeal, inconsistent, cumbersome, and sometimes unwelcoming for learners. As a key measure to improve this situation, the NFETL report identifies the need to develop a coherent and consistent sector-wide approach.

Why is RPL important? Is it a burden, or a resource to be optimised?

The range of learners seeking access to HE through routes other than direct school-to-college is varied and is changing rapidly. More work is required to better understand this diverse group, but a preliminary analysis of the categories currently identified (which of course overlap and intersect) suggests they include the following:

Mature students with lower levels of formal educational attainment

Recent research on mature-student participation identifies the flexibility provided by RPL as critical for underrepresented groups (HEA, 2021). In this context, RPL can be understood as a mechanism that can expedite progress towards mainstreaming equity-of-access goals and the target participation rates set out in the National Access Plan.

Holders of level 5 or 6 FET awards

Many of these learners seek courses cognate with their prior awards and may progress via HEI links with FET providers. Enhanced RPL services and opportunities would provide greater levels of access and choice for these learners and would support progress towards targets for FET award holders in HE.

Career changers or enhancers

These learners may present for RPL as individuals, as members of cohorts supported by companies, or through programmes such as Springboard. Some may seek entry to level 9 courses, perhaps not (exactly) cognate with level 7 or 8 awards already held. There are examples of standardised RPL channels designed for career-enhancing cohorts and of some customised HE programmes leading to new qualifications.

Portfolio builders

This category of learners has emerged in recent years with the development of career models based on multiple employments and 'portfolios' of work opportunities: people working this way assemble skill sets and qualifications that are varied and that require constant extension and updating. There is potential demand for HE courses and qualifications that are oriented to meet the needs of these 'new professionals'.

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These learners tend to be highly market-oriented, expecting to find clear information and transparent entry procedures for courses they might undertake. They are willing to use online learning opportunities; therefore, they have worldwide access to HEIs. They typically seek value for time invested – they are unwilling to waste time relearning what they already know.

Older students

This category includes people who have retired, but also many others who are not in the full-time labour force. It is a growing sector of potential participation in HE. Some of these learners already hold HE awards; they now wish to return to learning but are not necessarily contented with informal extramural programmes.

Already, many HEIs have identified demand for new or adapted programmes, as well as novel arrangements for access or progression, arising out of labour market developments and emerging new skills needs. Some of

these initiatives arise out of labour market activation measures, such as Springboard (an upskilling initiative in HE) and projects under the Strategic Innovation Fund (supporting innovation, collaboration, and reform in HE). Others are driven by industry or professional bodies' requirements in upskilling.

But perhaps the most significant development is the realisation that the HE students of today will not be 'one-shot' participants in a pre-career learning experience, as has been the case for most students until recently: rather, they will engage in multiple participations in HE as their careers evolve, building portfolios of qualifications reflecting their accumulating knowledge and experience. Several Irish HEIs are already engaged in meeting this demand and are offering micro-credentials in addition to the traditional ranges of HE degrees and diplomas.

“ The key message is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it.

All these emerging activities involve RPL at some stage; some are essentially RPL-driven. There is clearly a lot of RPL going on in HE in Ireland, and there is every indication that much more will take place in the years to come. It is imperative that we organise it properly and work towards an efficient, user-friendly, and quality-assured system to maximise the potential of these existing and emerging learner groups for the benefit of individuals, higher education, society, and the economy.

What actions are required to embed RPL in HE?

The key message from this analysis is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice focused on attracting diverse groups of learners and informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it. (This, for example, should lead to the elimination of words like 'non-standard' in relation to RPL application processes.) Policies should include plans to:

- establish the necessary structures and procedures to ensure that prospective students, employers, professional bodies, and others can easily access information and contacts
- build expertise in areas such as:
 - assessment and evaluation of informal and non-formal learning
 - the design of new qualifications of varying 'shapes' and 'sizes'
 - tailoring of programmes
 - to address required learning outcomes
 - for flexible delivery (e.g., not necessarily in traditional academic timetables, perhaps in compressed or intensive study blocks).

But can a HEI afford RPL? Apart from any direct additional costs, establishing RPL processes may often require reallocating resources and reorganising responsibilities. Recognising these challenges, initiatives such as Springboard allocate funding on the basis that use of RPL in recruitment for courses will require support. But the most realistic response to the issue of RPL costs is for the HEI to reframe the question: Can we afford not to do this?

HEIs that are already active in RPL development identify the cost and commitment as an investment in capacity, processes, and organisational structures that will reap a significant return:

- in the attraction of new, diverse cohorts of students
- in the development of career-long relationships with learners who will return repeatedly for upskilling, refresher programmes, career-enhancement qualifications, etc.
- in the ability of the HEI to participate in funded programme provision (both employer-led and via State schemes to address skills needs)
- in the ability of the HEI to build on its role as provider of ongoing upgrading and updating for programmes to occupational or professional sectors. There is particular potential in the development of strategic relationships with new or emerging professional areas – e.g., which HEIs will provide programmes to support the developing field of green energy?

Much of the investment involved in RPL is in the initial reorganisation and the establishment of a system to operate it within the HEI. Ongoing operating costs should be considered in the broader context of the returns from the new business generated, though a question remains as to the broader funding model and how this might support more RPL into the future.

“ The most realistic response to the issue of RPL costs is for the HEI to reframe the question: Can we afford not to do this? ”

As for the wider sectoral dimension of the task of embedding RPL in HE, the HEIs and their representative bodies are already working collectively towards this goal. The key action undertaken has been the establishment of the National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project. This joint THEA/IUA initiative is already under way. Several significant outcomes are anticipated:

- A new National Policy Framework in 2022 will provide the underpinning for action on RPL throughout HE. This will also address the multiple calls for a coherent national approach to RPL (Goggin et al., 2015; DES, 2011, 2016; Cedefop, 2018).
- The project will promote the development of a range of resources and materials (procedural templates, tools, case studies, etc.) that will help build capacity in the sector and will make the practice of RPL easier for HEI staff, particularly in relation to assessing informal and non-formal learning.
- Project leads are being appointed in each of the 19 participating HEIs. These key personnel will coordinate the streamlining of policies, procedures, and systems across their HEIs in a way that is coherent and consistent with the emerging National Policy Framework. To ensure that measures introduced are tailored to what will work locally, each HEI will be asked to identify steps to be taken to embed RPL into existing governance and quality structures.
- RPL in HE will be actively promoted, particularly to enterprise, in order to achieve the ambitious target of 6,000 annual RPL admissions by 2025.

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Celebrating the works of the 2021 graduation class at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)



Aoibh Foynes from Laois, 22-year-old graduate of Animation at IADT, watches as her final year project *The Big Head* is projected onto the wall of the Lexicon Library in Dún Laoghaire.

Micro-credentials are the latest shiny new thing attracting educators' increasing attention. Indeed, 2021 may become known as the year of micro-credentials. On the surface, the micro-credentialling movement offers great promise in helping to redesign and even reimagine more future-fit and complementary credential frameworks to enhance employability, continuous professional development, and the goal of a thriving learning society. But is there a danger that the micro-credential may be a wolf in sheep's clothing?

Introduction

In June 2021, Google announced 1,000 scholarships for free study for Dublin jobseekers (O'Dea, 2021). Successful recipients can complete a range of online courses delivered through Coursera. Google has a stated goal of disrupting established education models through its new Career Certificates, which it claims will be recognised as the equivalent of a full bachelor's degree for recruitment purposes (OECD, 2021a). Other high-profile companies are also offering new types of learning experiences that both challenge and complement the traditional university degree.

Removing the sheepskin

There is a growing sense that 'skills, rather than occupations or qualifications, form the job currency of the future' (Deloitte, 2019, p. 19). The 'sheepskin effect' of higher education, where its intrinsic worth has little to do with the time and effort that students devote to their studies but rather the parchment obtained at the end, is believed to be losing its employability value (Technológico de Monterrey, 2019).

Whether or not this is true, it is one of the reasons cited that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to develop a micro-credential strategy. There is evidence from around the globe that an increasing number of institutions are rushing to follow early micro-credentialling pioneers by repackaging their traditional offerings to prepare more work-ready graduates (Brown et al., 2021a). Cote and White (2020, p. 8) expand on why HEIs need to embrace micro-credentials:

First, traditional teaching and learning models have not adapted adequately to changing student demands and labour market needs. Higher education – particularly the university sector – has been confronted with a growing

Micro-credentials Untethered: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?



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list of critiques to the still-dominant, campus-focused program models: long and relatively inflexible programs; inadequate recognition of prior learning; slow or limited innovation in pedagogy; insufficient student supports for career-readiness; weak alignment to labour market needs; and a limited commitment to online and digital-enabled learning.

Beware of the wolf

Is it just another fad? In a stinging critique of micro-credentials, Ralston (2021, p. 83) argues that they are nothing more than a case of 'learning innovation theater'. At a deeper level, he argues that HEIs are selling their soul to business interests and market forces by unbundling the degree to quickly bolster their profits. According to Ralston, the emphasis on future skills is at the expense of educating the whole person:

The craze represents a betrayal of higher education's higher purpose and a loss for students and faculty who continue to see university learning as more than vocational training (ibid., p. 92).

“The concept of micro-credentials is not new... For decades, short courses have been an essential part of adult education and have had a prominent role in continuing professional education in many professions.”

This line of critique argues that the drive to unbundle the traditional degree can be traced to the forces of the 'neoliberal learning economy' (ibid., p. 83). From this viewpoint, higher education has become a form of a commodity, marketed and sold and acquired like any other. Wheelahan and Moodie (2021, p. 1), similarly, argue that micro-credentials are 'gig qualifications for a gig economy'.

While critique is usually a valuable source of insight, sweeping generalisations are unhelpful. Micro-credentials are being developed in multiple contexts with a variety of objectives, from fulfilling lifelong learning to broadening participation. They should therefore not be treated as a single uniform entity.

Charting the field

The field of micro-credentials is complex, and there is no global consensus on the term (Oliver, 2021). Confusing matters further, several other labels are commonly used instead of it or interchangeably with it. Despite this problem, many governments have been attracted to micro-credentials as part of their strategy to get people back to work after Covid-19 (OECD, 2021b).

In November 2020, for example, the provincial government in Ontario, Canada, announced \$59.5 million over three years for a major micro-credential development programme (Government of Ontario, 2020). The previous month an exciting Irish initiative was launched, with €12 million available under the Human Capital Initiative to develop a national multi-campus micro-credential (MC2) system over five years (IUA, 2020). The growing investment in this area is evidence that 'micro-credentials are seen as a valuable tool by institutional leaders' (OECD, 2021b, p. 3).

Interestingly, Usher (2021) describes the current attraction of micro-credentials as being like 'catnip to politicians'. While cats might be less

dangerous than wolves, there is a degree of memory loss in some of the claims about the potential of micro-credentials. After all, they are already ‘huge and hiding in plain sight’ (Matchett, 2021). An Australian study found there were 2.6 million people already enrolled in non-qualification ‘training bundles’, primarily to meet regulatory requirements in workplace safety, emergency preparedness, and authority to operate (Palmer, 2021). It also found that this market is largely ‘private’, with largely no government contribution.

In Canada, the St John’s Ambulance has been offering fee-paying short courses in basic first aid for well over a century. In fact, these courses were first offered in 1833, and now more than half a million Canadians annually seek to complete St John’s certificates (Toronto Workforce Innovation Group, 2021). In 2020, over 10,000 jobs posted online in Toronto were found to have required some form of first aid training.

Though we have limited data on similar courses in Ireland, the key point is that smaller formal and non-formal training bundles have existed for many years. The concept of micro-credentials is not new (Oliver, 2019). Hudak and Camilleri (2021, p. 5) reiterate this point:

For decades, short courses have been an essential part of adult education and have had a prominent role in continuing professional education in many professions. In diving instruction, vendor-led IT certification, and in medical continuing professional development, they are even the dominant form of education. The idea of ‘unbundling’ Higher Education into smaller parcels, functions and courses has been frequently mentioned in literature since at least 1975, while in European policy making the idea of offering short courses for reskilling has been present since at least 2001.

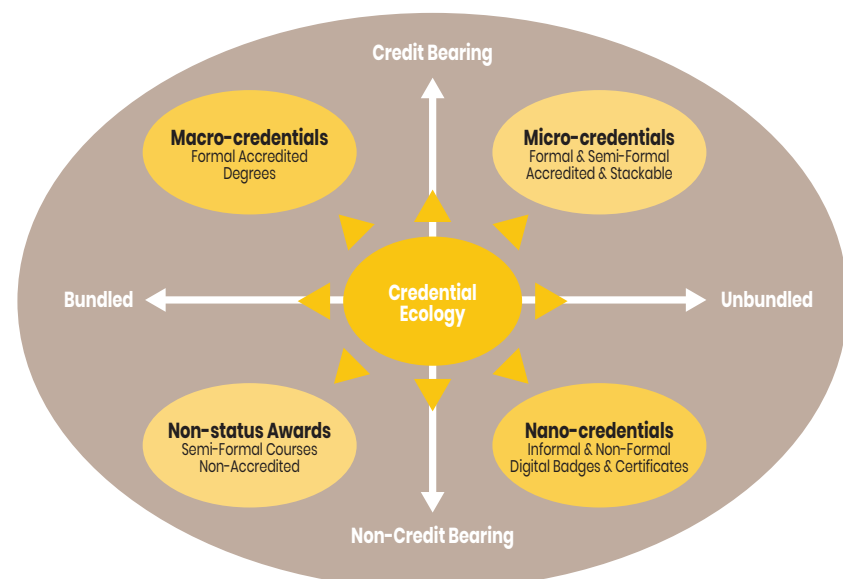


Figure 1: The new credential ecology (Brown et al., 2021a)

Remapping the landscape

An important distinction needs to be made between older and newer types of micro-credentials. Importantly, many of the older types appear to serve different purposes from traditional macro-credentials. They are often awarded by different types of organisations based on different standards, professional frameworks, or quality-assurance processes.

To illustrate the relationships between different types of credentials, Brown et al. (2021a) attempted to map the new and emerging landscape. Figure 1 presents four credential quadrants across two axes. At one end of the y-axis, we position traditional macro-credentials and credit-bearing micro-credentials. On the x-axis, we show the degree to which credentials and related units of learning are bundled together by the awarding body – in contrast, at the other end, to the level of personal choice that learners have over the make-up of their own learning bundle.

In this typology, micro-credentials are differentiated from other types of credentials on the basis of their unbundled, credit-bearing, and stackable nature. However, the distinction between quadrants is not as clear-cut in reality. To add clarity, the European Commission’s Higher Education Consultation Group on Micro-credentials proposed the following truncated definition:

“A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience.”

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. (European Commission, 2020, p. 10)

This definition makes it explicit that a micro-credential is a documented award by a trusted body to signify that a learner, upon assessment, has achieved learning outcomes of a small volume of learning against transparent standards and in compliance with agreed quality-assurance processes (Brown et al., 2021a).

Ideally, micro-credentials should be referenced to, or embedded in, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and in National Qualification Frameworks (MICROBOL, 2021). However, our Irish national survey of employers shows that this definition needs to take greater account of industry settings and workplace training (Nic Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2021).

Better plotting the literature

While progress has been made on the definition front, there remains a lack of data on the value of both older and newer types of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are largely data deserts when it comes to understanding tangible individual and societal benefits.

Accordingly, in 2021, we undertook a ‘state-of-the-art’ literature review on micro-credentials for the European Commission (Brown et al., 2021b). After following a tripartite methodological approach (Figure 2), we identified 149 relevant publications. A second set of inclusion criteria was then developed to screen those publications most relevant to Europe. This subsample (n = 45) is presented alongside the larger sample for comparison.

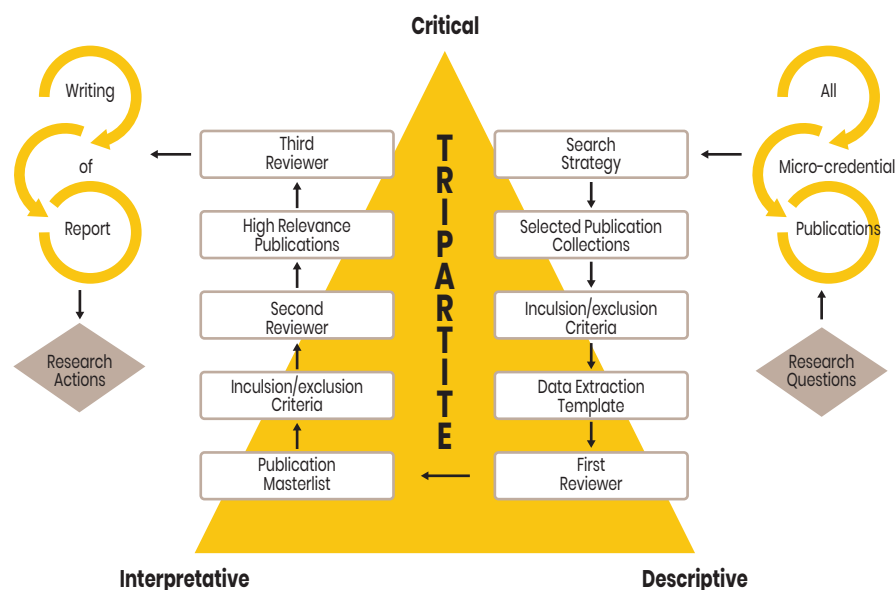


Figure 2: The tripartite methodological approach

Drivers and Attractors for Micro-credentials

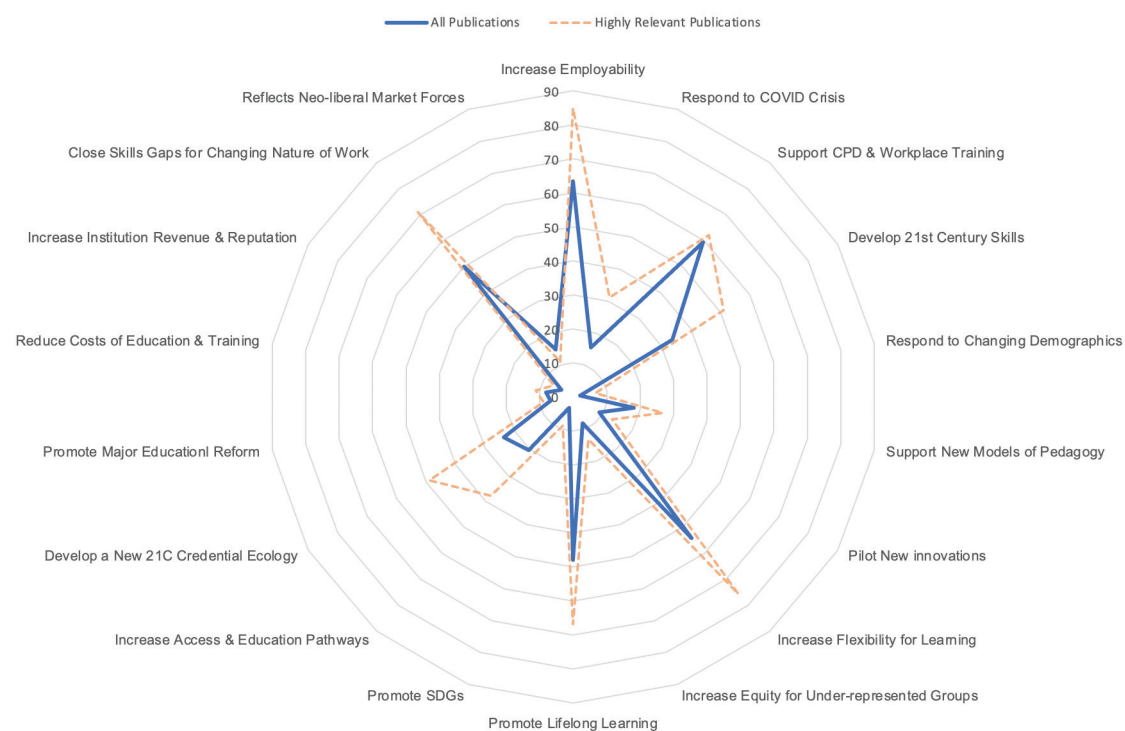


Figure 3: Drivers and attractors for micro-credentials

Figure 3 illustrates the drivers and attractors identified in analysing the literature. We found inherent tensions, mutually nested connections, and competing worldviews in the positioning of micro-credentials. On the premise that 'it is theory that decides what we can observe' (Stachel, 2002, p. 238), the literature serves to remind us that education systems consist of palettes with conflicting ideological, epistemological, and pedagogical assumptions. Though simplistic, at the root of these assumptions are two broad worldviews: the tradition of the learning society, and the influence of the knowledge economy.

Not surprisingly, a strong discourse on knowledge economy is woven throughout our analysis of the wider sample of literature covering areas related to employability (64%), closing skill gaps in response to the changing nature of work (50%), and supporting continuous professional development (CPD) and workplace training (60%). These drivers were often supported by publications making bold predictions; for example: 'around 85% of the jobs that today's learners will be doing in 2030 haven't been invented yet' (Institute for the Future, 2017, p. 14).

At the same time, understanding the rapid growth of the micro-credential movement requires a type of double vision, because imbued in the discourse are efforts to support new models of pedagogy (18%), increase flexibility for learning (54%), enhance access and new pathways to formal education (20%), and promote lifelong learning (48%).

From a learner perspective, micro-credentials are posited to provide the alternative approach to promoting flexible, accessible learning that today's learners increasingly require, because:

Frontloading skills and competencies through our schools and universities is not sufficient to prepare active and well-educated citizens for the rapidly changing nature of work and to actively participate in building a more sustainable future. (Brown, et al., 2021a, p. 2)

What is clear from the above drivers is that the competing languages of persuasion associated with the micro-credential movement are part of a complex milieu of change forces and social, cultural, and economic influences. Notably, explicit neoliberal economic drivers were evident in less than 15% of publications. While micro-credential drivers in the highly relevant sample centred on a wide range of societal issues, particularly employability (85%) and lifelong-learning-related agendas (67%), other key policy areas such as the Green Deal, equity, and social inclusion were only sparsely mentioned.

In search of greener grass

The answer to the question of whether micro-credentials are a wolf in sheep's clothing depends to a large extent on which underlying drivers you choose to emphasise. The lesson for Irish HEIs is to clearly define their own drivers and the outcomes they seek, rather than blindly following the rest of the flock.

A stronger focus needs to be placed on the demand side of micro-credentials, rather than adding to the supply with limited understanding

of the emerging market. It follows that deeper consideration of possible, probable, and preferable futures is required, because there are risks of unintended consequences, and the grass may not end up being greener.

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Seán de Fréine receives honorary doctorate from DCU

On 1 December 2021, Dublin City University conferred the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Honoris Causa) on Seán de Fréine. Receiving this award from DCU, Seán joins noted figures from politics, sport, literature and industry. They include Jim Gavin, Paula Meehan, Micheál Ó Muirheartaigh, Sonia O'Sullivan, Bill Clinton, Seamus Mallon, David Trimble, and most recently Annette Kennedy and Vivien Lusted.

Seán de Fréine is a scholar and a public servant whose work has been of fundamental importance in the cultural sphere in Ireland for six decades. He has been a foundational influence on the sociolinguistics of Irish society and on questions of language policy. Since the 1960s onwards, his published work has been central to academic and public discussion of issues of language, society and identity in Ireland.

Prof Daire Keogh, President of Dublin City University, said:

"Seán de Fréine in his profession and passions has embodied the DCU mission to 'transform lives and societies'. Through his extraordinary scholarship and exemplary public service, Seán has made a unique contribution to the preservation and promotion of the Irish language, and to the development of Ireland's cultural life."

The small celebratory event took place in the Helix on DCU's Glasnevin Campus with a small group of Seán's family and friends in attendance. Traditional Irish music group Na Casadaigh composed and recorded a piece of music, 'Ómós to Sheán', to celebrate Seán and to mark the occasion.



This article looks at the interplay between accountability and autonomy in university governance, and how this tension impacts on the management of universities and on the academic voice in the university and in public discourse.

University governance is an important issue for many reasons, not least of which is the centrality of academic freedom to democratic institutions. While university governance must provide for the efficient deployment of resources and the transparent use of funds – especially public funds – the focus on the university's moral purpose, particularly the requirement that it speak truth to power, must not be lost or diluted.

As Seery (2011, p. 28) points out, 'despite all attempts to reduce traditional liberal ideas to the science and technology of efficient delivery, value neutrality and evidence-based measurables, the view that education is fundamentally an ethical and moral undertaking is still widely held'. While Seery's comment has relevance to all education, its significance is all the more acute for higher education.

Nixon (2008) expects universities to contribute to the 'good society': one that aspires 'to be civilised, decent and just; civilised in its relationship between citizens; decent in its relations between institutions and their members; and just in its commitment to combat social and economic inequality'. In this construct of a good society, Nixon sees universities as the 'means whereby society understands itself, questions its values, defines and squabbles over its ends and purposes, and accrues the knowledge, understandings and insights necessary to inform the debate'.

Academic freedom is at the core of any such ethos. While the concept is not without complexities or limits (see for example Deeks, 2018), it is at the heart of a university's claims for the disinterested pursuit of truth. As expressed by the US Supreme Court, the 'nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth "out of a multitude of tongues [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection"' (cited in Euben, 2002). The practice of academic freedom usually means that:

Reflections on University Governance in Ireland

Navigating the accountability–autonomy continuum and the changing role of the university



Thomas Collins
Former Professor of Education, Maynooth University

- Faculty and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear or retaliation.
- It preserves the intellectual integrity of the education system, thereby supporting the public good.
- Faculty and students are free of governmental surveillance or censorship in their professional sphere.
- Faculty are not punished for holding contrarian or oppositional voices to university management.
- It provides for peer regulation in matters of academic quality – be it research, teaching, or scholarship.

With regard to institutional autonomy, the US Supreme Court (1978) has also recognised the First Amendment right of institutional autonomy, citing the four essential freedoms of a university as the right to 'determine for itself, on academic grounds, who may teach; who may be taught; how it shall be taught; and who may be admitted to study'.

So, in the context of this discussion, it is clear that the university's claim to public trust rests on its avowed commitment to a disinterested, impartial, critical, and civic-minded voice in the public discourse. The public therefore rightly expects the institution to act virtuously in the public interest. This expectation extends to include a requirement that the university act as custodian of the public good and speak out where that is being compromised or undermined.

“The focus on the university's moral purpose, particularly the requirement that it speak truth to power, must not be lost or diluted.”

Given such expectations, the task of constructing an appropriate governance model for universities is not without its complexities. A balance must be struck between, on the one hand, the needs of institutional autonomy and the protection of academic freedom for faculty, and, on the other, the public's need for accountability in the disbursement of public funds and for prudent and transparent internal management of the institution. With the passing of the Universities Act in 1997, the Irish state sought to square this circle by a reasonably sophisticated system of checks and balances in the institutional scaffolding of universities.

In his seminal study of higher education in Ireland, Clancy (2015) refers to Burton-Clark's 'triangle of co-ordination', whereby the co-ordination of HE systems can be best understood 'with respect to the relative importance of state authority, academic oligarchy and market forces' (p. 246). The contestation between these three differing forces is often publicly ventilated in Dáil Public Accounts Committee hearings where university management are brought face to face with the personal nature of public accountability in university management. In his review of the evolution of university governance in Ireland, Clancy concludes:

there is a clear pattern whereby universities have experienced a sharp decline in autonomy in the face of a more interventionist state, which seeks to define more precisely what their role should be and how their outputs should be evaluated. While for several decades this was a gradual transformation with periods of successful resistance by the academy, since the publication of the Hunt Report it has become the defining policy direction whereby institutional accountability will be measured with

respect to the achievement of objectives set out in performance contracts entered into with the HEA [Higher Education Authority]. (ibid., p. 270)

If this pattern is as Clancy suggests, it can also be posited that as state and market forces become increasingly preeminent in university affairs, this has facilitated – if not required – the rise in managerialism in the university at the expense of faculty. While both the Universities Act (1997) and the more recent Technological Universities Act (2018) accord statutory recognition to the Academic Council in both types of institution, in practice the sense is that the academic voice is increasingly displaced in the academy by a proactive executive thoroughly inserted into the realpolitik of the market, the economic drivers, and government funding strategies.

This leads Shattock (2017) to conclude that since the 1980s the ‘transfer to a “marketised” system of funding has changed the internal balances ... further strengthening the role of the executive and rendering both the governing body and the academic community increasingly dependent upon its expertise in managing risk, interpreting and exploiting the market and taking advantage of external opportunities’ (p. 13). Shattock bemoans this development, suggesting that ‘university reputation, research success and brand image are closely associated with adherence to an earlier governance model ... and that the loss of collegiality, the growth of top-down management and the disengagement of academics from the machinery of institutional self-government is prejudicial to academic performance’ (ibid., p. 16).

“Knowledge is essential, and we have both citizens and leaders who help us remember why. But knowledge without understanding is not second best; it can be downright harmful – Bergan

As Bergan (2018) suggests, with regard to the kind of higher education we need, ‘knowledge is essential, and we have both citizens and leaders who help us remember why. But knowledge without understanding is not second best; it can be downright harmful’ (p. 27). The university’s role in providing a safe space where truth can be spoken to power is one of democracy’s important safeguards and is an indication of the health of the democracy.

As countervailing, deliberative voices and institutions, particularly in the media, have become increasingly anaemic in western societies, it is important that the contrarian, thoughtful, and disinterested academic voice is reinvigorated such that, under the guise of accountability, the existential character of the academic contribution to a healthy democracy is not also lost.

[Note: This article draws largely on the author’s previously published work at Collins, 2019.]

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New stamp from An Post celebrates 'Jane, Lady Wilde'

In advance of International Women's Day on 4 March, 2021, An Post issued a new stamp celebrating the renowned 19th century Irish nationalist and feminist writer, Jane, Lady Wilde (1821–1896), whose pen-name was 'Speranza'.

Unveiling the stamp, Debbie Byrne, Managing Director of An Post Retail, said that Jane, Lady Wilde was a woman who epitomised the meaning of #ChoosetoChallenge, the theme of this year's International Women's Day.

"She was a tireless and outspoken campaigner for women's rights, equality and other causes."

Aside from her writing under the pen-name 'Speranza', Jane, Lady Wilde was a multi-linguist, translator and staunch advocate of women's rights. In 1851, she married William Wilde, an ophthalmic surgeon, and their second-born son was the playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde.

The appointment in December 2021 of Professor Mark Rogers as the interim president of University College Dublin means we have seen six university presidents appointed in the current calendar year. With pending appointments of two more in 2022 – to lead the recently established Technological University South-East Ireland (TUSEI), consisting of Waterford Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Carlow, and Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA), consisting of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, and Letterkenny Institute of Technology – we will have eight new leaders in our university sector.

Whereas all those in post today who were serving at the start of 2021 are male, four of the six presidents appointed in 2021 are female, which brings us within striking distance of a more balanced representation at senior academic level. Below are the biographical details of the current leadership team in our traditional and technological universities.

– Dr Brian Mooney, editor

Ireland's University Presidents 2022

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh

President of NUI Galway

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh became the 13th president of NUI Galway in January 2018. Previously he was professor of accounting and dean of business at University College Dublin, leading its schools in Dublin (UCD Lochlann Quinn School of Business, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, UCD Smurfit Executive Development) and its overseas programmes in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

Having attended Scoil Iognáid and Coláiste Iognáid, Prof Ó hÓgartaigh is a first-class honours, first-in-class graduate of NUI Galway. He trained as a chartered accountant with Arthur Andersen and has a PhD in accounting from the University of Leeds. He has been published widely in the accounting field and has held academic positions at Dublin City University, UCD, and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

A former Fulbright scholar at Northeastern University in Boston, USA, he has served as audit committee chair at the Department of Marine, Communications and Natural Resources and as a member of the audit committee at the Department of Finance. He has also served as an independent non-executive director of Avolon, one of the world's largest aircraft leasing companies, where he also chaired its audit committee. He



is currently a member of the non-statutory board of the Saolta Hospital Group and chair of its strategy committee.

As president of NUI Galway, Prof Ó hÓgartaigh has maintained his research interests with his contribution on the history of financial accounting practice in *The Routledge Companion to Accounting History* (2nd edition, May 2020). He is a board member of the National Library of Ireland on the appointment of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Professor David FitzPatrick

President of Technological University Dublin

Prof David FitzPatrick is the inaugural president of Technological University Dublin following its designation as a TU on 1 January 2019. He has excellent academic credentials, considerable experience at executive level, a significant international profile, and extensive industry experience, having managed the product development and research of orthopaedic devices.

Before assuming his role as president of TU Dublin, Prof FitzPatrick was a highly regarded principal of the College of Engineering and Architecture and dean of engineering at UCD, with responsibility for the strategic planning, personnel management, and budgetary performance of the faculty. Since 2014 he has also served as a member of the university's executive team.

Prof FitzPatrick holds a bachelor's degree in engineering from Trinity College Dublin and a doctorate in biomechanics from the University of Oxford. In the orthopaedic industry he worked initially with Howmedica International in Limerick, followed by a career with DePuy International in Leeds, which included managing product development, strategy, and research programmes for knee, upper limb, trauma, and spinal product lines.

In 1998, Prof FitzPatrick returned to Ireland to UCD's Department of Mechanical Engineering. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 2005, associate professor in 2010, and full professor in 2012. He served as head of the School of Electrical, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering from 2005 to 2011, followed by a period as vice principal for internationalisation and development in the College of Engineering and Architecture.

Appointed as provost of the Beijing–Dublin International College in 2012, he led the development of Ireland's largest dual-degree programme initiative in China and has continued in that role since becoming principal of UCD's College of Engineering and Architecture, and a member of UCD's University Management Team, in 2014.

Professor Daire Keogh

President of Dublin City University

Prof Daire Keogh began a 10-year term as president of Dublin City University (DCU) in July 2020. A Dubliner, he is a distinguished historian who served as president of St Patrick's College Drumcondra and as deputy president of DCU after its incorporation in 2016. He has published extensively on the history of popular politics, religion, and education in Ireland. He is a fellow at the University Design Institute at Arizona State University and a founding member of the European Quality Assurance Register committee.

Prof Keogh is founding chair of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce higher education and research committee. He is a chartered director (Institute of Directors) and is a member of a number of boards, including the non-partisan Women for Election. A passionate educator, he plays a leadership role across the sector. He is a member of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, chair of the Board of Marley Grange National School in Rathfarnham, and a member of the board of management of Clongowes Wood College.

He served as a council member of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and as a member of the board of the Centre for Cross Border Studies (2012–2017). Prof Keogh is a graduate of the National University of Ireland (BA), the Gregorian University Rome (BPh), the University of Glasgow (MTh), and the University of Dublin (PhD) and is a former government of Ireland senior research fellow.

Professor John O'Halloran

President of University College Cork

Prof John O'Halloran became president of University College Cork (UCC) in September 2020. Before taking up this role, he served as deputy president and registrar since 2018. There he led the development and implementation of UCC's first Academic Strategy, setting out plans to reimagine the curriculum, transform assessment, and nurture graduate attributes to position UCC students for their future world of work. Having served as vice president for teaching and learning, and vice head of the College of Science, Engineering and Food Science, he is an academic leader with an ambitious vision for the future of higher education.

In all his leadership roles, Prof O'Halloran has delivered transformation through collaboration, including the evolution of a connected university, advancement of research, modernisation and enhancement of learning and teaching, development of digital education, curriculum redesign, lifelong learning, and staff development. He is committed to developing an inclusive culture for all students and staff at UCC, one where equality is upheld and diversity is respected. He is chair of the Athena Swan steering group, which secured a bronze institutional award for UCC in 2016 and



several departmental-level awards. He is a member of the Top Management Programme Professional Reference Group of Advance HE, UK.

Prof O'Halloran is chair of the board of Fota Wildlife Park and a board member of the Central Applications Office, the NUI Senate, the Ludgate Hub, and UCC's Glucksman Gallery, among others. He is a judge for the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and for the L'Oréal-UNESCO Women in Science Awards. He is the founding director of UCC's Quercus Talented Students' Programme and is co-chair and founder of the UCC Green Campus Forum, which has received many awards for its prioritisation of the green agenda, including the first green flag ever awarded to a university.

Prof O'Halloran holds the chair in Zoology at UCC and previously held academic posts at Colby College in the USA and at the University of Wales. He has published 250 research papers and several books on ecology, ornithology, ecotoxicology, and biodiversity. His research works focus on developing a deeper understanding of the impacts of ecological change related to land-use and climate.

Professor Cathal Kelly

Vice Chancellor of RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences



Prof Cathal Kelly was appointed CEO and registrar of Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) in December 2009. During his tenure, he has overseen significant strategic developments of RCSI, including the activation of its independent degree-awarding powers in 2010 and authorisation to use the title of university in Ireland in 2019, making RCSI Ireland's first not-for-profit, independent university.

RCSI was founded by royal charter in 1784 as the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and has had permission to use the title of university overseas since 2015. When authorisation extended to Ireland in 2019, RCSI became known as RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Prof Cathal Kelly is a graduate and fellow of RCSI and was dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences from 2006 to 2009. Previously he was a consultant general and vascular surgeon with a special interest in endovascular surgery in Beaumont Hospital. He combined this role with chairmanship of the surgical division and an academic position in RCSI as vice dean for curriculum change.

In addition to completing his basic and higher surgical training in Dublin, Prof Kelly pursued a research fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He won the prestigious Patey Prize of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland for research he conducted at Beaumont Hospital. In 2021 his title was updated to include vice chancellor, reflecting his remit as the academic and administrative leader of RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Newly Appointed University Presidents in 2021

Professor Eeva Leinonen

President of Maynooth University

Maynooth University appointed Prof Eeva Leinonen, an international researcher and current vice chancellor, as its next president effective from 1 October 2021. Prof Leinonen succeeded Prof Philip Nolan, who led the university for the previous 10 years.

Prof Leinonen has held the role of vice chancellor of Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, since 2016, having previously been deputy vice chancellor (academic) at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales. Before moving to Australia in 2012, she was vice principal (education) at King's College London.

Originally from Finland, Prof Leinonen has a background in linguistics and psychology. She engages with researchers in Finland and Italy in ongoing research into pragmatic language development in children and contextual processing deficits of children and young adults with autistic spectrum disorders.

In accepting her appointment, Prof Leinonen said she was honoured to have the opportunity to lead this fine university in the next stage of its development: 'High-quality innovative education, world-class research that has positive societal impact, and transformational educational opportunities for all who can benefit irrespective of background are hallmarks of Maynooth University and resonate closely with my approach to university education.'



Professor Linda Doyle

President and Provost of Trinity College Dublin

Prof Linda Doyle was appointed by academic staff and student representatives as the 45th provost of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), coming into office on 1 August 2021. Prof Doyle's previous leadership roles have been as dean of research (2018–2020) and founder director of CONNECT, a national research centre co-funded by Science Foundation Ireland and industry, which focuses on future networks and communications. She was also director of the Centre for Telecommunications Value Chain Research (CTVR) and is currently a director of Xcelerit and Software Radio Systems, two CTVR/CONNECT spinouts.

Prof Doyle has served on many boards, including as chair of the board of the Douglas Hyde Gallery (2013–2021) and member of the board of Pallas Project Studios, KTH Sweden Scientific Advisory Board, and board of the Wireless Innovation Forum. Currently she is chair of the Ofcom Spectrum Advisory Board in the UK and member of the National Broadband Steering Committee in Ireland and the Open Research Europe Scientific Advisory



Board. She serves on the boards of Science Gallery International and the Festival of Curiosity, an annual STEM outreach activity for children.

Before her appointment as provost, Prof Doyle was professor of engineering and the arts in TCD. Her expertise is in wireless communications, cognitive radio, reconfigurable networks, spectrum management, and creative arts practices. She has raised over €70 million in research funding and has published widely in her field. She has a reputation as an advocate for change in spectrum management practices and has played a role in spectrum policy at national and international levels. Combining creative arts practices with engineering for many years, she founded the Orthogonal Methods Group, a research initiative that works in critical and creative tension with technology to generate knowledge, insights, and alternative research orientations across disciplines sometimes perceived as mutually exclusive. Prof Doyle has given more than 100 keynotes and invited talks at events globally.

As well as her contributions to research and the arts, Prof Doyle is an active advocate for women in engineering and computer science. She has been involved in many initiatives such as Girls in Tech, Teen Turn, and HerStory. In 2017 she was recognised as one of the 10 women stars in the world working in networking and communications. She holds an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from the National University of Ireland, and an MSc, PhD, and P.G.DIP. STATS from TCD. She is a fellow of TCD.

Professor Kerstin Mey

President of University of Limerick



Prof Kerstin Mey was appointed as University of Limerick's (UL) new president for a 10-year term on 8 October 2021. Prof Mey has served as interim president of UL since 1 September 2020. Before taking on the role of president, she held the position of vice president of academic affairs and student engagement at UL.

Prof Mey was appointed vice president and professor of visual culture at UL in April 2018, having previously held roles as pro-vice-chancellor and dean of the Westminster School of Media, Arts and Design and as professor of contemporary art and theory at the University of Westminster, London. She said:

Fifty years on, as a still young and dynamic institution, I want us to capitalise on UL's heritage as pioneer, entrepreneur, and disruptor. We have a major part to play in the social, economic, and ecological transformation of the mid-west region. It is an exciting time for us. Developing our city centre campus over the next period will enable us to strengthen UL's civil and civic mission, to grow connectivity and collaborations with communities, businesses, and industry as well as with Limerick City and County Council and to impact on place-making and the regeneration of the city and the region.

There are significant opportunities now to re-examine the higher education model in Ireland and preserve the learnings which have come from the

impact on academic delivery and research during the Covid-19 period. We must weave what we have learned into advancing our working practices, transforming how we teach and learn and how we engage in research and knowledge exchange.

Professor Mark Rogers

Interim President of University College Dublin

Prof Mark Rogers is the newly appointed interim president of University College Dublin. Before his appointment he was registrar and deputy president of UCD, and he previously served as dean of science. He graduated from TCD with a first-class honours degree in genetics and completed a PhD in genetics at the University of Glasgow. Awarded fellowships from the European Molecular Biology Organization and the John Douglas French Foundation for Alzheimer's Research, he spent five years as a researcher in prion diseases in the laboratory of Nobel laureate Prof Stanley Prusiner.

Prof Rogers' research is in the area of scrapie in sheep and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle. He successfully licensed immunodiagnostic technologies that have been used in BSE diagnosis, resulting in over €2 million in royalties accruing to UCD.

With over 20 years' teaching experience at all levels from undergraduate to PhD supervision, Prof Rogers strongly promotes a student-centred and student-led approach to education that encourages independent learning. As dean of science and then as registrar and deputy president, he has recognised the need for educational programmes informed and led by research. Focusing on enhancing opportunities for students, he has simplified entry routes, promoted a student-centred approach across the university, and moved the university to an outcomes-based curriculum focus.

Professor Maggie Cusack,

President of Munster Technological University

On 1 January 2021, as Munster Technology University (MTU) was founded, Prof Maggie Cusack took up the role of inaugural president. Prof Cusack did her BSc degree in cell biology at the University of Glasgow. Her PhD at the University of Liverpool was a Tate & Lyle CASE award, where she studied the sweetest substance known (surprisingly, a protein called thaumatin).

Protein research brought her to geosciences at the University of Glasgow, where, as a postdoctoral research assistant at the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), she investigated proteins in brachiopod shells. At the University of Glasgow she held several leadership roles, including associate dean for



the Faculty of Physical Sciences Graduate School, international lead for the College of Science and Engineering, and head of the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences.

As professor of biomineralisation, Prof Cusack has broad and multidisciplinary research interests, collaborating with earth and biological scientists, materials scientists, isotope geochemists, chemists, and engineers and securing international funding as well as funding from four UK research councils: NERC, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and Medical Research Council.

In 2017 Prof Cusack joined the University of Stirling as dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and in 2018 she completed the senior executive programme of the London Business School. She holds several external roles, including member of the Scottish government's STEM Strategy Advisory Group, chair of the Learned Societies Group, and member of the Royal Society partnership grants committee and the Carnegie Trust PhD committee. She completed a three year term as vice president (physical sciences) of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. She is the interdisciplinary advisor of REF subpanel B7 (earth systems and environmental science) in criteria-setting and assessment phases.

Professor Vincent Cunnane,

President of Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest



Prof Vincent Cunnane became the inaugural president of Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) on 1 October 2021. Previously, Prof Cunnane was president of Limerick Institute of Technology, which he joined in September 2016 from Institute of Technology Sligo, and where he had been president since 2014.

Prof Cunnane was formerly CEO of Shannon Development (2008–2013) until its merger with the Shannon Airport Authority to form the Shannon Group. Before that, he was vice president of research at University of Limerick, where he also lectured and researched (1990–2008).

Prof Cunnane is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of physical electrochemistry. He recently stepped down as chair of the governing council of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies after 10 years in the role, and he was also a member of the board of the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training. He is currently chair of the Technological Higher Education Association.



Students Adam Lennon and Chloe Staunton avail of some of Trinity College Dublin's new sensory spaces

Trinity unveils sensory spaces to make campus more inclusive

In December 2021, Trinity College Dublin unveiled a series of new spaces on its city centre campus, designed as supportive sensory environments to meet the needs of students and staff.

Trinity Provost Linda Doyle welcomed the new spaces:

"This has been a return to campus like no other, at a time when students and staff have been under unprecedented stress. It is more important now than ever that everyone in the College community will have access to places around the campus where they can find respite to focus, or to relax in peace. The **TCD Sense Project** is a wonderful addition to our campus and will contribute to the health and wellbeing of all."

The plans were devised by TCD Sense - The Trinity Sensory Processing Project - which aims to make Trinity more inclusive by reviewing and improving new and existing spaces, building sensory awareness, and delivering specialist supports to students who experience barriers to managing and adapting to the sensory environments of college.

The project currently spans more than 80 study spaces in the library, sensory areas within four student social spaces, as well as individual sensory rooms. Hundreds of students are using these spaces every day, and many more are to come.

Trinity Student Union President Leah Keogh said:

"It has been a joy to work alongside the Disability Service on this project which has uniquely provided quiet spaces in busy places. The attention to detail is what has made this project so effective; the colours, textures and pieces were all hand selected to create the best possible environment for students to take some time out. This project has set the benchmark for what our student spaces should be going forward".

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Higher Education

Professor Kerstin Mey was appointed President of University of Limerick on October 8, 2021, following an open competition and subsequent approval from the university's Governing Authority. Prior to that, she had served as Interim President at UL from 1st September 2020. She is also a former Vice President of Academic Affairs and Student Engagement.

The Tertiary Education Landscape



Jim Breslin

Secretary General at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

This article offers an overview of tertiary education in Ireland from a contemporary governmental perspective. It sets out the department's strategic vision, the legislative picture, the development of technological universities, and the broader landscape of further and higher education in the country.

Structure and strategy

The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in summer 2020 elevated Irish tertiary education and research to a central and more visible position, both nationally and internationally. I was delighted to get the opportunity to lead the establishment of this government department and to shape the contribution it will make to the future of our country.

Notwithstanding the momentous challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have made good progress. The response from the sector and the appetite to work in a collaborative and unified way have been instrumental in this progress.

The support received from colleagues in other departments has also been crucial. In particular, colleagues in the Department of Education, led by Seán Ó Foghlú as secretary general, have been enormously supportive and generous in helping our new, fledgling organisation to become operational quickly. Both departments are highly committed to ongoing collaboration on the many areas of shared policy interest.

DFHERIS's first Statement of Strategy, for 2021–2023, was submitted to government and published in March 2021. We set out six strategic goals:

- talent – develop talent and skill
- innovation – promote research, knowledge, and innovation
- inclusion – support learning for all
- international – succeed on world stage
- governance – good governance to enhance quality
- capacity – department fit for purpose.

The Statement of Strategy, building on the original decision by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin to set up the new department, recognises the importance of further and higher education and research to the

economy and to society. From the outset, Minister Simon Harris has been very clear that we are both an economic and a social department – driving future economic prosperity, but making sure that no one is left behind.

The establishment of the department has coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Unquestionably the pandemic has brought huge challenges and setbacks for our sector. But in keeping tertiary education operating safely, albeit remotely, the sector has proven how determined, flexible, and innovative it is in meeting the needs of learners. And in the carefully planned return to campuses in September 2021, the recognition of the unique contribution of colleges as places of engagement has never been greater.

The students, academic and administrative staff, and public servants who worked so hard to make this possible deserve enormous praise. This work has been characterised by close and ongoing engagement among all stakeholders and shared leadership.

Even as we all grappled with an unprecedented national crisis, the department was also quietly commencing its work towards further developing our further and higher education sector as a high-performing, world-class system. In doing so we are fortunate to build upon the many achievements already realised in recent years.

Legislation and reform

As we look to drive our ambitions forward, we are seeking to ensure that the fundamental building blocks of governance and funding are firmly in place. That is why the government is committed to the reform of the Higher Education Authority Act 1971.

There have been enormous changes to the higher education sector since this legislation was enacted 50 years ago. We have seen an increase in the number of students from around 20,000 to over 200,000 today. There has been a major expansion in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs). Higher education has become more accessible to all sectors of society, and more adaptable to meeting the State's social, economic, and labour market needs.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report from the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was published in September 2021, and the department looks forward to supporting the Minister in advancing the legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The model informing the proposed legislation is one of co-regulation. This recognises the importance of autonomy and agility on the part of HEIs, coupled with appropriate accountability.

The legislation will allow institutions to meet their responsibilities and accountabilities in line with contemporary best practice. It will provide the Higher Education Authority (HEA) with clarity on its overall role in planning and managing at the system level and, where necessary, intervening proportionately to address issues where individual institutions may need additional supports.

There has been extensive consultation with stakeholders throughout the development of this legislation. The legislation will recognise that autonomy and flexibility are essential features of HEIs, but also that this must be matched with transparent governance and accountability to students, stakeholders, and the public.

I would emphasise that nothing in the legislation will impinge on the academic freedom of HEIs or their staff. This is a core tenet which will continue to be enshrined in legislation. Institutions will continue to be supported to do what they do best – delivering excellence in education and research and providing places of engagement and insight to support a flourishing democratic society.

I would emphasise that nothing in the legislation will impinge on the academic freedom of HEIs or their staff. This is a core tenet which will continue to be enshrined in legislation.

The work undertaken under the auspices of the EU's Reform Directorate on the future funding and sustainability of Ireland's higher education system has now been completed. In his recent Budget speech, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, noted that his colleague Minister Harris will shortly bring a report on the future funding of the sector to government for consideration and that government will ensure that its decisions on future funding for this sector reflect its vital role as a cornerstone of our economic model. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on an implementation process for the significant reforms recommended in the EU-funded study and look forward to establishing this process with the sector and wider stakeholders in 2022.

Technological universities

It is also worth highlighting the considerable work under way to further the development of technological universities (TUs), so that they make a distinct contribution to our higher education system and contribute to balanced regional development and other national goals.

For the past 50 years, the regional technical colleges and then the institutes of technology (IoTs) provided vocational, technical, technological, and professional skills and qualifications to generations of students. The strengths of the sector reside in strong links with local and regional enterprise and communities, and a practical, applied-research-informed approach to teaching and learning.

These institutions provide pathways into higher education which, through geography or circumstance, may not otherwise have been within the reach of many young (and not so young) people. We want to nurture and build on these strengths in the new TUs.

The TUs will have a distinct role and purpose in the overall higher education sector – ensuring that the diversity of learners' needs and interests is met by a breadth of institutions. This applies across the entire range of the National Framework of Qualifications, from level 6 to level 10, with apprenticeships as a continuing vital component.

TUs are rooted in their communities, and the collaboration that this facilitates presents a key opportunity. In October 2019 the TU Research Network (TURN) high-level advisory group, comprising the president of TU Dublin and all presidents of HEIs then seeking TU status and chaired by independent UK higher education transformation expert Professor Phil Gummert, produced its seminal report ‘Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity’.

It details the case for TUs to lead the delivery of national strategic objectives for regional socio-economic development, higher education access, research capacity-building, and skills progression. On foot of the TURN report, government announced in Budget 2020 the provision of €90 million over the following three years under a TU Transformation Fund to support IoTs to jointly achieve TU designation and to further the advancement of established TUs.

Approval has been secured for an additional, separate allocation of €40 million up to 2024 for specified TU activity under the government’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan. In 2021 the department provided €9 million in additional funding to Science Foundation Ireland, which now operates under the aegis of the department, to establish a new Frontiers for Partnership Awards programme that will support increased research capacity in TUs and IoTs. Work is also in train on applications for additional TU-research-related funding under Operational Programmes co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

The strides made since the enactment of the Technological Universities Act 2018 mean that in just three years, in place of 14 IoTs of varying sizes we will have five TUs of significant scale and strength and two IoTs.

Three TUs are now fully operational. The first to be established was TU Dublin in January 2019, followed by Munster TU in January 2021. Most recently, we have seen the newest, TU of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest, established on 1 October 2021. In 2022, the work of the Connacht–Ulster Alliance of Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), IT Sligo, and Letterkenny IT, and the TU of south-east Ireland consortium of Waterford IT and IT Carlow, will see two more established.

The new Housing for All strategy commits government to legislating to allow for TUs to borrow from the Housing Finance Agency to deliver purpose-built student accommodation, the shortage of which is currently a challenge to furthering access to TUs and across the higher education sector. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this priority issue.

Government and DFHERIS, working with the HEA, is fully committed to ensuring that technological universities continue to be supported over the period ahead, so that all parts of the country can benefit from a regional, multi-campus TU with the opportunity to enable greater access to high-quality higher education, improve skills and lifelong learning, and increase research and innovation output as engines of regional and national specialisation and competitiveness.

“The strengths of the (IoT) sector reside in strong links with local and regional enterprise and communities, and a practical, applied-research-informed approach to teaching and learning.”

Broader landscape

It is essential that our entire sector – both further and higher education – leads the way in equipping learners with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in a world that is rapidly changing, and that it provides the country with the range of talent needed to address critical challenges and respond to the quickening pace of globalisation and digitisation.

The latter has been accelerated by the pandemic. Earlier this year we produced Adult Literacy for Life, a 10-year strategy addressing not just literacy and numeracy but digital literacy, all of which are now fundamental requirements for someone fully engaging in society and realising their full potential.

The development of apprenticeships is a key priority, including in providing the skills needed to tackle the housing and climate crises. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021–2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships to make them accessible to employers and learners, with a target of 10,000 registrations a year by 2025. There are now 62 apprenticeship programmes, including craft apprenticeships but extending into many new areas, such as finance, ICT, biopharma, engineering, logistics, hospitality, and arboriculture.

Meanwhile, the CAO website has been redesigned so that prospective students can clearly see that higher education is not the only option after the Leaving Cert, and that further education and apprenticeships offer exciting career possibilities.

We have launched a new website, the Right Course, which is a one-stop shop for those looking to upskill, train, or re-skill. It is aimed at a wide range of people, including school leavers, those recently unemployed or looking to change employment, employees who want to upskill in their field, and employers seeking to develop their workforce.

Lifelong learning will be an essential feature of how we equip ourselves for the pace of change that we will continue to experience. It will be an important component of an enhanced further and higher education sector in the years to come.

In conclusion, this is a really exciting time for further and higher education in Ireland, and it is now up to all of us to take this opportunity and deliver for the people of Ireland. Establishing a new government department in the midst of a global pandemic has not been without its challenges, but we are well on the road in our ambition to lead a sector that is innovative, adaptive, and inclusive and is supported to contribute in the best way possible to Ireland’s social, economic, and cultural development.

This article reflects on the emergence of technological universities in Ireland and the significant changes in the higher-education landscape in 2021. It considers the distinctive role that the sector will play in the years ahead, the strengths resulting from its capacity for collaboration, and some of the challenges that it faces.

New horizons

An education yearbook serves a number of purposes: a digest, the catalyst to an inclusive conversation, the opportunity to focus a particular topic. But it also serves to document, to act as a record, and to provide to future generations of readers a contemporaneous insight into the major concerns of the day.

Doubtless any review of 2021 will feature the impact of Covid-19 and the manner in which all of education managed to negotiate that challenge, and, through the heroic and innovative work of all concerned, maintain provision, albeit with a necessarily reduced level of student experience. But the fact of the global pandemic should not disguise the appreciable advances that were realised, not least in the landscape of higher education. Indeed, it can be argued that the impact on modes of working actually facilitated a pace of change that was unlikely to have occurred had there not been such a pressure.

It is likely that 2021 will be viewed as a most significant year for higher education in Ireland. It has seen the formal launch of two new universities, Munster Technological University and the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest. Two remaining applications, from the consortium in the south-east and along the north-western seaboard, have been evaluated by international peers, and their reports are on the minister's desk at the time of writing.

This represents an unprecedented realignment of the higher-education landscape and a significant increase in potential. Most critically, for current and prospective learners, it provides access to the highest quality of education and training in their region. The high-quality and strategically focused research concentration will increase the potential for regional innovation.

The advances this year are consonant with the commitment to invest in technological universities

A Changing Landscape for Higher Education



Dr Joseph Ryan
CEO of Technological
Higher Education
Association

(TUs) which is provided for in the National Development Plan 2021–2030. As that document states:

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 continues to provide the framework for far-reaching changes in the higher education landscape. One of the most significant changes is the development of multi-campus technological universities, an agenda which is central to regional development ambitions and is now well advanced.¹

The plan continues:

TUs have a key role to play in driving the rebalancing of regional growth and development, as envisaged in the NPF. Investments in the new and planned multi-campus TUs will strengthen their role as anchors of enterprise, will further develop research and innovation capabilities that are aligned with regional specialisation, and will help attract and retain talent in the regions.²

“ It is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.

The National Development Plan speaks to the distinctive role set out for the technological sector which was documented in the roadmap as originally elucidated in 2011. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 had expounded the vision for the development and evolution of institutes of technology into a smaller number of stronger amalgamated institutes. The change proposed was unprecedented, and it is not surprising that it has taken a decade to realise what will likely be five technological universities by the close of the academic year 2021–22.

That these new entities would be distinctive was clearly adumbrated in the National Strategy, in the legislation (Act no. 3/2018 – Technological Universities Act 2018), and in the subsequent Technological University Research Network (TURN) report.³ TURN was established in February 2019 by the Department of Education and Skills to examine and report on how emerging TUs could achieve their sectoral and national strategic objectives.

It was an inclusive process, externally chaired and including representatives from the presiding department, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), TUs – existing or intending – and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and it issued the final report in October 2019. It proposes that the introduction of TUs into the higher education landscape in Ireland is a bold and important step and that the concept is distinctive in its rootedness in regional and local communities and economies, reaching out internationally from those roots and drawing international education and research practices directly back into the regions.

These were to be new entities with the confidence to build on the excellent heritage of achievement established through the institutes of technology. This was positioned in the TURN report as a new university sector with the power to substantially enhance the capacity of the higher-education system while also responding to government priorities and societal challenges. The link to broader national policy objectives is unambiguously stated:

The core mission and purpose of TUs is closely aligned to meeting a number of key National Strategic Outcomes (NSOs) and Public Investment Priorities contained in Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018–2027. The NDP specifically highlights the role of TUs in meeting the NSO for deepening the talent pool for regional sectoral clusters and driving applied research and innovation.⁴

The distinguishing character of a technological university was admirably captured by both Josephine Feehily and Professor Vincent Cunnane, respectively chair and president of TUS: Midlands Midwest, in their addresses at the formal launch of the new university in Athlone on 1 October 2021. Both speakers emphasised the sense of place and the access agenda that are central to the democratising influence of the sector. Indeed, Dr Feehily noted that what has attracted her to this sector is its characteristic and consistent responsiveness to community.

The challenges

It has been a long road, but the advances in recent years attest to the remarkable work of sectoral staff, management, and governors working with the fullest support of government and its agencies. But we must also be realistic, and there are challenges for the nascent sector, three of which are outlined below.

First, experience teaches that we are slaves to perception. The challenge was to form new institutions reflecting the state-change required of them by government while remaining faithful to the distinctive ethos of the technological sector. The TURN report requires that ‘TUs must also work together to respond to Government policy’.⁵ The membership agreed that:

They need to work together to build the reputation of this new university sector since they share responsibility for that reputation nationally and internationally. TUs that are being formed in more or less the same period have an opportunity to identify and collaborate on achieving mutual projects to ensure the most efficient use of resources and the widest impact for investment, particularly in the initial phases of TU development.⁶

Technological universities sit within a larger construct. That architecture realises their distinctive contribution as their key strength. Having the confidence to retain and proclaim that discrete character while also operating as an acknowledged and respected university is the challenge. What is a new concept for Ireland is an established currency abroad.

Second, we are in the embryonic stage. As in the passage cited above, the initial phase of TU development requires unity and considerable support. The TURN report was vital in that it fuelled key seed investment in the system, some €90 million over three years. It will be necessary to build the case to extend this support if these new institutions are to deliver on the objectives set for them by government.

Allied to this is the task of determining a sustainable funding model for higher education. At the time of writing, Europe has delivered its consideration of the options set out in the Expert Group on Future Funding

for Higher Education, led by Peter Cassells in 2016, and Minister Simon Harris TD has committed to settle the question of underinvestment in third-level education.

There is shared agreement on the role of higher education as the catalyst for economic activity, for social cohesion, for job creation, and for enhanced quality of life. We equally share the understanding that our people are our key asset, and that investment in human capital is essential for national competitiveness. It is critical for the sector as a whole that this matter be foregrounded, debated, and determined in the months ahead.

A third challenge is that of agreeing a working contract that can meet the ambitions of staff and serve the expanded mission of the technological sector. A process is under way on this through the HEA and with the support of key stakeholders and input from the OECD. It will take time to work through the detail, but the ambition would be to have a new contractual construct available in 2022. This endeavour will include determinations on a new researcher career development and employment framework.

Conclusion

This article has consciously eschewed the temptation to focus on the impact of Covid-19. But it has noted that the altered working modes have facilitated acceleration of certain engagements and have led many in the education community to consider the learnings from persevering through the age of Covid-19 and the benefits attaching to new methods of working. For learners, the advent of technological universities brings increasing opportunity.

The Covid-19 experience has also reemphasised the importance of, and possibilities attendant on, digital connectivity through the extended regions covered by the new TUs. These new modes for a new time will present opportunities to learners to progress beyond former boundaries. Such a facility is also essential in preparing future generations for what is already an increasingly digital society and economy.

Given the emphasis that national policy places on balanced regional development and the sustenance of local communities, and noting the salient role expected of TUs to support this goal, we can affirm with some confidence that 2021 has been a most significant year and one with the seed of considerable promise for the years ahead.

ENDNOTES

1. Government of Ireland, Project Ireland 2040: National Development Plan 2021–2030, p. 98.
2. Ibid, p. 99.
3. Connectedness and Collaboration through Connectivity (October 2019). <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/12/Report-of-the-TU-Research-Network-2019.pdf>.
4. Ibid., p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 19.
6. Ibid., p. 19.

This article reflects on how nurse education moved away from the traditional 'hospital-based' schools of nursing to a system of universal degree-level education for all nurses in higher education.

Background

With 2021 designated as the Year of the Nurse and Midwife, it is timely to examine where nurse education has come from and how it will meet healthcare challenges in the future. Few would argue that nurses do not require an education, particularly given the vital role that nurses have had in patient care throughout the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Yet twenty-five years ago, the suggestion that nurses should receive a degree-level education was met with incredulity and hostility. I recall receiving letters from members of the public expressing concerns that nurses would become uncaring if they received a degree. There were also media articles querying why nurses needed a degree since they mainly did washing and toileting. It is striking that there was so much open hostility to nurses being educated, since they provide 24/7 care, they make up 50% of the health workforce, and better-educated nurses contribute to better patient outcomes (Aiken et al., 2017).

Nearly two decades ago, Ireland moved away from the traditional 'hospital-based' schools of nursing to a system of universal degree-level education for all nurses in higher education. How this all came about can be traced back to 1994, when the system of nurse training underwent considerable change with the establishment of links with higher education and the introduction of a pilot scheme for a Diploma in Nursing (An Bord Altranais, 1994).

Following this, the Commission on Nursing resulted in the introduction of a four-year degree as the sole route of entry to practice (Government of Ireland, 1998). Although nursing sought entry to higher education on educational grounds, the driving force behind the move was pragmatic and fiscal, as the Commission report emerged from an industrial-relations conflict that involved direct strike action by nurses (Fealy and McNamara, 2007).

Nurse Education Over the Years

Reflecting on the past and meeting the challenges of the future



Prof Imelda Coyne

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The move to degree-level nursing education in 2002 was an exciting but also challenging time for nurse education, as it involved significant disruption for nurse teachers employed in schools in the hospitals. I remember this time vividly, as I helped lead the integration of six schools of nursing into higher education at Dublin City University and the accreditation of the curriculum for this new four-year degree programme. In 2006, after extensive consultation, a new direct-entry undergraduate children's and general integrated nursing degree programme also began, which put the education of children's nurses on equal footing with that of nurses from other disciplines.

Approval of third-level status for nursing programmes moved nursing to an all-graduate profession, which signalled far-reaching changes for nurses and nursing. In the past, student nurses functioned as 'workers', whose learning needs were subservient to organisational needs (Fallon et al., 2018). In contrast, the degree programme combines theory with clinical practice placements in each year, and students are supernumerary till the final internship in fourth year.

Research shows that direct patient care delivered by nurses with bachelor degrees leads to improved patient outcomes and less morbidity (Aiken et al., 2017).

Nurses are educated to be critical thinkers and lifelong learners and are now on equal standing in interdisciplinary teams. Although differing models of nurse preparation exist internationally, in Ireland it continues to be a graduate qualification preparing nurses to work in many settings and to be leaders. For example, many nurses in the role of clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners lead in specialist areas of healthcare, contribute to better patient care, and improve patient satisfaction (Coyne et al., 2016).

Impact on patient care and outcomes

Ensuring that nursing is an all-graduate level of education is essential, because empirical research shows that direct patient care delivered by nurses with bachelor degrees leads to improved patient outcomes and less morbidity (Aiken et al., 2017). The association between higher registered nurses (RN) staffing (educational level and number) and better patient and nurse outcomes is well documented. Having nurses with degree-level education in a 1:6 patient ratio will prevent approximately 3,500 deaths per year (Bruyneel et al., 2015; Ball et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2019).

Improvements to work environments, nurse staffing ratios, and the educational composition of nurses have been shown to lead to improved quality of care and patient safety (Sloane et al., 2018). Furthermore, when healthcare organisations reduce the number of graduate nurses by adding other categories of assistive personnel, this may contribute to preventable deaths, erode quality and safety of hospital care, and contribute to hospital nurse shortages (Aiken et al., 2017). There is considerable evidence of the benefits to patients of deploying well-educated nurses to provide care in adequately staffed units, yet much of this evidence is not being implemented (Rafferty, 2018).

Workforce challenges

With healthcare changing rapidly worldwide, it is timely to consider the key challenges that face nursing and the healthcare and education system. The future will pose new global challenges that will affect health and healthcare, potentially including further infections of pandemic proportions like Covid-19. According to Catton (2020), 'The future resilience of healthcare services will depend on having sufficient numbers of nurses who are adequately resourced to face the coming challenges.' So adequate numbers of skilled nurses will be critical to successfully tackling healthcare challenges, but currently there is an estimated global shortage of nearly 6 million nurses (WHO, 2020).

This problem is projected to only get worse with an ageing workforce and challenges in recruiting and retaining nurses (WHO, 2016; Van den Heede et al., 2020). Without enough nurses, healthcare procedures and operations will be restricted, and hospital units may have to close. This is a recognised global challenge that will have a profound impact on future healthcare. The three key areas to address nursing shortages are recruitment, retention, and redesign.

Way forward

Society is changing and becoming more diverse, with many different cultures, ethnicities, traditions, and family configurations. The pace of technological advancement is unprecedented and has the potential to transform how the health services and people manage their health and wellbeing. In relation to redesign, the Department of Health's (2019) Sláintecare report recognises the huge role that nurses play in health promotion and disease prevention. The action plan includes expanding nursing roles, moving care to community where possible, a new nurses contract, and the development and introduction of a new model of nursing and midwifery. Nursing education is constantly adapting and innovating so that nurses have the competence, skill, and knowledge that they use every day to provide patient-centred care and to save lives.

“The future resilience of healthcare services will depend on having sufficient numbers of nurses who are adequately resourced to face the coming challenges.”

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Winners of Foundation Scholarship Award

Nursing and Midwifery Students at Trinity College Dublin, some of the Winners of the Foundation Scholarship Award. This highly prestigious distinction requires students to display a breadth of knowledge beyond their standard coursework.



The transition to higher education changed dramatically for the class of 2020. Researchers at Maynooth University studied the first-year undergraduate experience in this challenging time. This article reports on several important insights from the student responses. The pandemic has dramatically changed these students' introduction to and experience of higher education, both academically and socially. The findings presented here offer insights relevant to all higher-education settings.

In September 2020, just over 46,000 first-year students commenced higher education. These students, unlike previous cohorts, experienced the transition during a pandemic, and a majority began their undergraduate degree experience fully online. During the academic year 2020–21, a team of researchers at Maynooth University (MU) undertook an in-depth case study into the first-year undergraduate experience during this challenging time. This article reports on important insights that emerged from the student responses.

Much has been written about the pandemic and its negative influence on young people's mental health. But our understanding of how first-year students experienced the transition to higher education during this time is limited. This research is timely, because despite substantial literature on the economic returns to higher education, far less is known about the social and academic experience of university life from the students' perspective, unlike in other institutional contexts (Arum and Roska, 2010; Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Soria et al., 2021).

This article reports on findings from the first wave of an online survey conducted at the end of semester one with first-year undergraduate students at Maynooth University, aimed at capturing their unique experience of university life and distance learning during the pandemic. MU is an interesting case study because it has the most diverse student intake: the highest share of entrants with a disability (15% compared to the Irish university average of 13%) and the highest share of entrants from target socio-economic groups (29% compared to 24%) (HEA, 2020).

The survey sought to generate a better understanding of university life and the difficulties that first-year students faced during the pandemic and to make recommendations for future actions. It was distributed to all first-year students during

The First-Year University Experience During a Pandemic



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December 2020 and January 2021, and it contained both closed and open-ended questions; 22% (727) of the first-year cohort completed the survey. Though the data collection yielded a marginal over-representation of female, high-attaining, and mature students, the results were reweighted to make them representative of the first-year population. The survey specifically explored five areas, three of which are discussed here:

- The transition to higher education
- Adapting to an online environment
- Learning and belonging in the online environment.

The transition to higher education

The transition to higher education is known to be difficult, and many young people face considerable stress in a points-driven admissions system. Unlike previous cohorts, the first years of 2020–21 did not sit the Leaving Certificate, which was replaced by a process of calculated grades. Over two-thirds of those who came through that process agreed that the changes to Leaving Cert assessment affected their wellbeing and made them feel stressed and anxious about transitioning to university. Higher levels of agreement came from female, working-class, and first-generation students and those who secured lower points than their counterparts through calculated grades. It is likely that these first years have experienced more anxiety than previous cohorts on entry to higher education.

“ Few felt that their ‘final year of education was good preparation for university’.

Considerable effort has been made by the Transitions Group in Ireland to improve the transition between school and university and the links between them, a task made more difficult by the pandemic. Our survey found that a minority of first-year students at MU felt they were still not ready to choose a university course. This was particularly evident among those with the lowest calculated grades. Previous research has identified that some young people, particularly those from disadvantaged contexts, express concern about an absence of information on post-school choices and course options (McCoy et al., 2014); this may have been compounded during the pandemic.

First-year students were divided on the statements ‘The subjects at university build on previous study at school’ and ‘There are clear links between school and university’. Few felt that their ‘final year of education was good preparation for university’. A considerable minority would have preferred to start university with a general first year before choosing a specified course.

These findings replicate those from a nationally representative study of school-leavers who had transitioned to higher education (McCoy et al., 2014). It is likely that the pandemic and calculated grades have affected how students perceived their university readiness. There is also clear social stratification in the structure of opportunity, given that some under-represented student groups are more likely to feel less prepared than groups more typically found in higher education.

When asked about the experience of university versus school, the students were more positive, despite the pandemic. A majority agreed that studying at university is more demanding and also more fulfilling, even during a

pandemic. Those with more resources experienced a smaller 'transition gap', meaning that their transition to university was smoother.

Adapting to an online environment

The key challenge for these students was in adapting to the online environment, which, though it offers many advantages, such as technological and personal innovations, also presents many challenges (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Besser et al., 2020; Garip et al., 2020). Key objectives of the research were to assess the extent to which first-year students felt they could adapt to the online environment, and to identify the characteristics of students most challenged by this shift.

Given the diversity of the first-year student intake at MU, not all students had previous experience of online or distance learning. This was particularly the case for mature students and those who had transitioned into university from further education. When students were asked how they felt they had adapted to online or distance learning, 'not at all well' was the response from a substantial minority of those without experience of this form of learning and from a substantial minority of HEAR/DARE entrants.

Many of the barriers for first-year students were adaptive rather than technical, reflecting findings in the US (Soria et al., 2021). For example, the greatest challenge they experienced was a lack of motivation for remote learning. Fewer cited 'a lack of clear expectations for online learning from lecturing staff', 'a lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment', or 'feelings of an inability to learn effectively in an online format'. Multivariate analyses showed that all else being equal, male and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades were more likely to experience more challenges. A majority cited a lack of interaction with other students as a key barrier, reflecting the importance of relational learning at higher education.

A majority cited a lack of interaction with other students as a key barrier, reflecting the importance of relational learning at higher education.

The online experience also presented opportunities, with a majority of the first-year students indicating positive aspects. Some felt they could now fit learning into their lives more easily, reflecting the findings of the pre-pandemic INDEX survey (NFETLHE, 2020). Positive aspects included having more time to do college work, having more preparation for classes, feeling more productive in completing assignments, and attending classes more regularly. However, all else being equal, first-generation students and those with caring responsibilities were less likely to feel this way.

Learning and belonging online

While staff adapted quickly to teaching online, that environment placed greater emphasis on self-directed learning for students. The less structured a learning environment is, the more self-regulation is required to master several competing tasks and to achieve individual goals (Arum et al., 2021). Our survey did not measure self-regulation or mastery per se, but it did ask students about their use of goal-setting for learning. Goal-setting and self-regulated learning are important for student success (Davis & Hadwin

2021). Goal-setting was common among the majority of our first-year students, but less likely among first-generation and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades, perhaps reflecting the challenge of a less structured learning environment and limited familiarity with the expectations of learning at higher education.

The more adaptable that students are, the more they can relate to learning online and develop a sense of belonging (Besser et al., 2020), which also is important for higher-education retention. In the online environment, a minority of students had developed a sense of belonging to the university by the end of the first semester. Of great concern is that those with the lowest calculated grades or who experienced more obstacles to online learning were less likely to feel they belong to the university community, while those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way.

A majority of students felt that their relationships with staff and students were more positive than negative. Those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way about both types of relationships, but first-generation and mature students and students with disabilities were less likely.

Conclusion

The pandemic has dramatically changed the introduction to higher education for this cohort of first-year students. The transition to and experience of higher education remain socially stratified, and these patterns are likely to have been compounded during the pandemic despite an increase in higher-education places. Lower levels of information, resources, and knowledge about higher education and subject content, and an ability to adapt to online learning, are likely to have a bearing on the future experience of university life, both academically and socially.

As this group progress to second year, ongoing actions are required to improve and support their academic and social experience. Though these findings relate to one cohort in a specific university setting, they offer important insights that are relevant to all higher-education settings.

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Brace - the free social rehabilitation platform



Conor Motyer, Founder of **Brace**. Conor developed the platform following a serious sporting injury that he sustained and during which he experienced first-hand the mental toll involved in the injury recovery and rehabilitation process. Photo: Nick Bradshaw, Fotonic

Brace is a free social rehabilitation platform that enables people to take control of their injury recovery journey in a social and supported way.

Brace helps you to manage the physical and mental aspects of the injury recovery process through injury tracking and exercise management, experiential insights into injury recovery, and social and community support.

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The beta version of the **Brace** app is available for free download on both the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

Assessment Choices Post-Covid-19

How Covid-19 challenged and changed assessment – perhaps permanently

Covid-19 required higher education institutions to change their assessment practices, particularly in relation to summative, time-constrained, closed-book examinations. With various alternative assessment approaches having been used successfully during the pandemic, the question now is whether to return to pre-pandemic assessment practices or to continue to embrace and develop the changes introduced. We have the opportunity and responsibility to choose well.

Introduction

When the then-Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, announced a national lockdown on 12 March 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19, higher education institutions (HEIs) were forced to change their practices overnight. The first and most obvious change required teaching and learning to move from physical classrooms to remote online delivery. What was less clear was how the pandemic would challenge and change higher-education assessment practices.

For many years before Covid-19, HEIs had embraced the central importance of assessment. Nationally accredited programmes were designed around minimum intended programme learning outcomes (MIPLOs), with constituent modules delivering related minimum intended module learning outcomes (MIMLOs). Programme assessment strategies routinely ensured the *constructive alignment* of assessment practices (Biggs & Tang, 2011), encompassing assessment of, as, and for learning (NFETL, 2017a).

This provided continuity of alignment from individual module assessments, to MIMLOs and MIPLOs, and to discipline-specific and generic national award standards of knowledge, skills, and competences on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Before Covid-19, higher-education assessment seemed to have reached a stage of mature development, offering comprehensive, scaffolded, well-considered, robust, and reliable assessment systems.

The arrival of Covid-19 disrupted many forms of learning and formative assessment. Classrooms, labs, and studios were abandoned to ensure the health and safety of learners and teachers, requiring learning and assessment opportunities to be entirely recreated, often within the limits of online Zoom sessions and breakout rooms. This compromise proved particularly limiting



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in creative disciplines, where learners tried to complete practical assignments such as film-making that required close group work. Specific assessment challenges also arose in teaching and healthcare programmes, where opportunities for workplace learning and assessment were severely curtailed.

Covid-19's effect on summative assessments affected most programme disciplines, as it was no longer possible to gather hundreds of learners into examination halls to sit traditional closed-book, time-constrained exams. Unlike secondary education, where the State chose to replace the Leaving Certificate exams with teacher-assessed grades, in general, HEIs chose to remain as close as possible to the prescribed assessment by moving to online exams.

Online assessment

Online exams have been used for many years, for example by professional regulatory bodies in accountancy, and for the State's driver theory test. These require learners to present to test centre facilities with preconfigured computers, where the learners' computer usage is closely monitored throughout their test. Covid-19 restrictions precluded these options, because learners could not be gathered safely into test centres.

Proctored online remote exams allow learners to take exams from remote locations, typically using their own computer. Online invigilators monitor the learners throughout the exam using the learners' webcams. More sophisticated systems are configured to take control of the learners' computers, restricting their access to test-related software resources during the test.

The cost and availability of proctored online remote exam services presented challenges for HEIs, as demand during Covid-19 far exceeded supply. The technology that was required to allow learners' computers to be remotely restricted also generally exceeded their internet broadband capacities for uploading. While invigilators could monitor learners throughout their exams using the learners' webcams or phone cameras, the closed-book nature of exams had to be substituted with open-book or 'open-source' examinations.

While open-book and open-source exams have been used for many years in exam hall settings, their sudden imposition in an online format as a substitute for the previously prescribed exam-hall closed-book exam presented challenges for learners and teachers alike.

For teaching staff, the move meant they had to reimagine and redesign their exam on the basis that learners would have access to open-source material throughout the test. Teaching staff were supported by the institutions' teaching, learning, and assessment departments and nationally by the resources provided by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (NFETL, 2017b).

In order to ensure the continued approval of the learners' awards throughout the pandemic, HEIs were given freedom to use alternative assessments and

to implement appropriate emergency contingency arrangements agreed with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2020).

For many learners, the prospect of doing exams online was scary. Learners raised various concerns about their lack of experience of doing exams online; their computer, laptop, or tablet resources; their typing speeds; the time constraints involved; and their broadband speeds. To allay their fears, institutions organised mock exam sessions online, allowing learners to practise under no-stakes conditions. To allow for different typing abilities, institutions extended their scheduled exam times to allow for additional settling-in and uploading time. Institutions also retained the option for learners to complete their exam using pen and paper, and to upload scans or photographs of their completed scripts within the allocated time.

More significantly, to encourage learners to make the leap towards online exams, and in line with national and international developments, HEIs adopted various forms of 'no detriment' policies. These assured learners that regardless of their performance in online exams, they could repeat the exams later without limiting the grades available to them.

Collectively, the supports, encouragement, and assurances given to learners were highly effective in managing a successful transition to online exams by the summer of 2020. In particular, there was no evidence of any increase in learner requests for deferrals. Indeed, for a brief period in June 2020, there was an expectation of a full return to on-campus provision in the autumn, and a sense that things would return to normal.

As Covid-19 continued to present further waves of infection, with different variants of the virus threatening public safety, higher-education teaching and learning remained largely online apart from a brief reprise before Christmas 2020. This resulted in online exams, initially adopted under emergency contingency arrangements, continuing throughout the entire 2020–21 academic year.

Future assessment

Eighteen months from the start of the pandemic, as HEIs face into 2021–22, the external environment has once again been transformed. Thanks to the development and roll-out of vaccines, learners and teachers can again look forward to enjoying an on-campus learning experience.

Higher education, having learnt to adapt and transform teaching, learning, and assessment practices during Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns, now faces the question of to what extent it should return to pre-Covid-19 norms and how many of its practices during Covid-19 it should retain.

The choices ahead for assessment strategies are many and varied, with each having its advocates and detractors. Some teachers and learners may long to return to the certainty of the pre-Covid-19 days, when time-constrained exams offered trusted standards of measuring attainment and protection from plagiarism and collusion.

Others will point to the tendency for closed-book exams to emphasise rote learning and recall rather than assessing higher-order learning,

their limited suitability to the needs of particular learners, and their poor accommodation of universal design for learning (UDL) principles.

All will concede that gathering people into rooms and having them write with a pen and paper for hours at a time, while removing all available support resources, is at the very least artificial and contrived. All accept that it does not reflect real-life situations in which learners, as graduates, are expected to apply the knowledge, skills, and competences they've learnt on their programmes.

The future of assessment practices post-Covid-19 will depend on the choices made by HEIs. Learners on film programmes are likely to embrace the return of group work, and those on teaching and healthcare programmes will welcome the return of work placements. However, the return to on-campus, closed-book, time-constrained exams for learners from other disciplines need not be inevitable.

As we enter the 2021–22 academic year, teachers in higher education are actively re-evaluating and fundamentally challenging the merit of their previously prescribed or chosen assessments. If learners on music-production programmes can be assessed on the basis of their music compositions, and fashion designers on their collections, how might learners on more traditional programmes in business and computing have similar opportunities for authentic assessments instead of closed-book, time-constrained exams?

Higher-education learners are also reflecting on how they wish to be assessed. In particular, learners in the later stages of degree programmes, who have completed two years of 'open-source' exams, are already petitioning their faculties and academic councils to ensure they do not have to undertake closed-book exams for the first time as part of their award. Such requests warrant detailed consideration.

Rather than automatically returning to the same-old pre-Covid-19 assessment practices, higher-education teachers and learners now have the opportunity and responsibility to choose which way to proceed from the many authentic and diverse forms of alternative assessments available. Their challenge is to reimagine and repurpose assessments anew, to suit an altogether changed and exciting post-Covid-19 world.

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Women Leaders in Irish Higher Education

Reflections on recent progress and the challenges of sustaining it

This short article reflects on recent and current women leaders in Irish higher education, as we mark the end of the first year in post of the first woman president of an Irish university and the coming into post this year of three more. It also flags some of the challenges yet to be met and the vigilance required to maintain the progress made on gender equality in the sector over the past several years.

Introduction

It seems apt to be writing this short article on female leadership in the higher education (HE) sector as we draw towards the end of the first year in post of the first woman appointed as president in an Irish university. Prof. Kerstin Mey was appointed interim president of the University of Limerick (UL) in July 2020. It is also an appropriate moment to mark the appointment of Prof. Maggie Cusack as the first president of the newly created Munster Technological University; the commencement in post of Prof. Linda Doyle, the first woman provost of Trinity College Dublin; and the appointment of Prof. Eeva Leinonen, who took up the post of president of Maynooth University in October 2021.

Moving, finally, from one of the few countries in Europe never to have appointed a woman as president of a university, it is positive to see the progress that now gives us four women university leaders out of ten. It should be acknowledged that the institutes of technology have embraced women presidents well before any of our universities; the percentage here, however, has remained modest, at 18% as of December 2020 (HEA, 2021).

Leadership

I have had the privilege to lead in a variety of roles over my career, in both healthcare and education. In Irish HE I was the first woman appointed as full professor and head of school in Dublin City University (DCU), and the first woman – and only person to date – to hold the combined role of deputy president and registrar in DCU. I also held the first vice presidency for equality and diversity in the Irish HE sector, a role from which I retired this year. None of these roles would have been possible had my husband not supported me by becoming the main carer for our two children.

Leadership, in my view, means providing the vision, resources, models, and other supports required to enable and empower one's team to deliver and achieve to the best of their capacity. An effective



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Former Vice President
for Equality and
Diversity, NUI Galway
(retired)

leader must engage actively, humanely, courageously, respectfully, and humbly with all relevant stakeholders. Leadership also requires enthusiasm, energy, and active personal delivery of key aspects of the agenda.

In Irish HE, while it almost defies belief that it has taken 428 years to appoint a woman as president of one of our universities, it is heartening to see that Kerstin Mey's appointment in UL last year is not a once-off event. However, ensuring a sustainable cohort of senior women across our higher-education system who have the opportunities to move into professorships or senior leadership roles will require planning, nurturing, and robust monitoring on an ongoing basis.

Professors Kerstin Mey, Maggie Cusack, Linda Doyle, and Eeva Leinonen may have finally broken through this particular Irish 'glass ceiling', but it is important that we not be deluded, by the presence of these four leading lights, into believing that we have, as a sector, solved our gender equality and gendered leadership problems.

Women leading in higher education

One does not have to be a university or institute president to lead in higher education. However, in order to lead effectively, one needs vision and the ability to inspire, build confidence in, and enable a realisation of that vision – often while working through significant challenges. Equality of opportunity for women in higher education, including opportunities to access senior academic and leadership roles, has emerged as a significant challenge and opportunity for leadership in Irish HE over the past decade or so.

NUI Galway became 'first mover' on this agenda. Impelled to act, in light of the painful and damaging fallout generated by the loss of the Sheehy Skeffington gender equality case in 2014, NUI Galway appointed Prof. Jane Grimson, former vice provost of Trinity College, to chair a task force in gender equality, which reported in May 2016. Its 24 recommendations included the appointment of the first vice president of equality and diversity in the Irish HE system – only the second such post in Europe – to ensure that the task force recommendations would be implemented.

The Grimson report, as it is known locally, provided the blueprint for the first two gender-equality action plans implemented in NUI Galway, taking us to autumn 2021 (Grimson et al., 2016). Jane Grimson's leadership of the task force, and the excellent report produced, have had a profoundly positive effect, both directly and indirectly, on the experience of women in NUI Galway.

Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn consulted widely as she chaired and finalised the HEA (Higher Education Authority) Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions published in June 2016 (HEA, 2016). This later review produced recommendations not only for Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), many of which mirrored those in the Grimson report, but also for the HEA itself, for research funding bodies, and for the Department of Education and Skills. The implementation of its recommendations has impacted positively on the environment and opportunities for women across the Irish HE sector.

In February 2021, as part of institutional renewal of the Athena SWAN Bronze award, colleagues in NUI Galway were polled on perceived changes in opportunities for women over the past four years: see Figure 1.

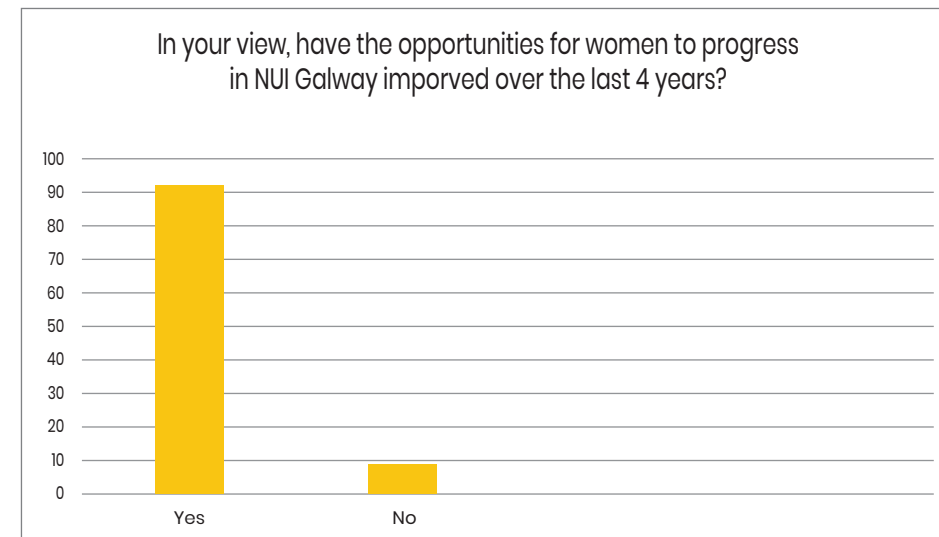


Figure 1: Response to question on opportunities for women – Town Hall Interactive Poll

It is now established policy and practice in NUI Galway, and in many of our HEIs, that all committees, working groups, boards, and panels at all levels in the university comprise at least 40% men and 40% women. This is key for the visibility and role modelling of women in Irish higher education, just as it is key for gaining the types of experience required for access to promotion, management, and leadership opportunities.

NUI Galway promotions and recruitment campaigns since 2016 have improved the proportion of women at senior lecturer grade from 33% to 46%, and at the personal professor grade from 16% to 28%. Overall, women currently represent 23.7% of the professoriate, up from 15% in 2016. See Figure 2.

Commitment and sustainability

This progress has all taken committed leadership, and much of the agenda has been led by women – both in our HEIs and sectorally. As we have seen, for example, the 2016 HEA review was led by Dr Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, and in 2018 Minister Mitchell O'Connor instituted the Gender Equality Action Plan, inclusive of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative posts, thus keeping gender equality and the dearth of women in senior and leadership positions on the HEA agenda (Flynn & Ryan, 2020). It has also taken commitment from both institutional and departmental leadership teams – men and women.

This leadership and commitment must continue if progress to date is to increase and become sustainable. International evidence and experience on the ground indicate that without continuing leadership, monitoring, and holding key actors to account, we quickly revert to type, and the gains made

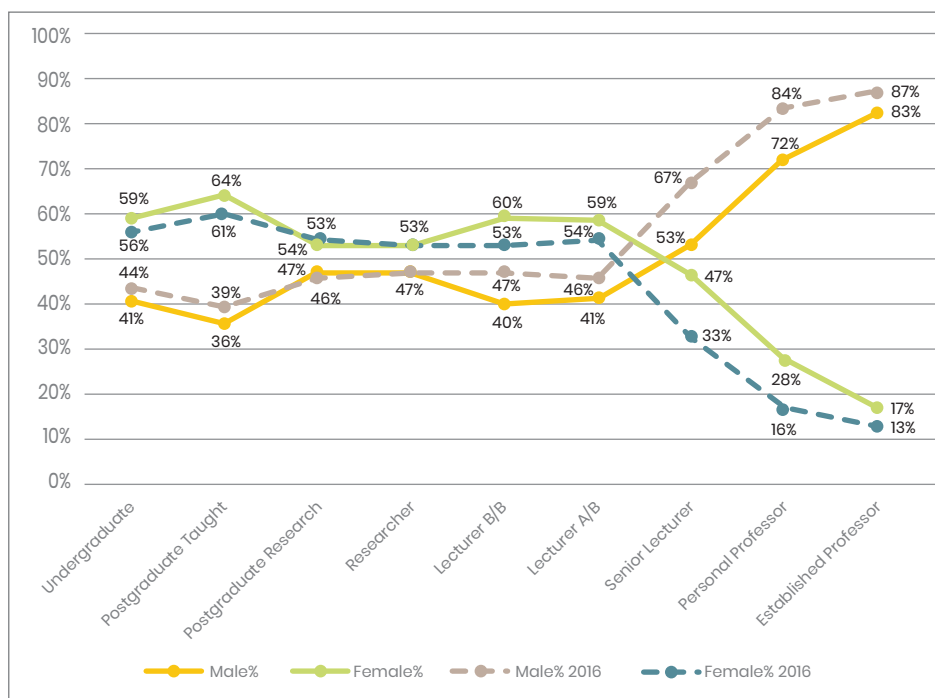


Figure 2: Academic career pipeline of all staff and students (2016 dashed line, 2020 solid line)

on gender equality can unravel rapidly. Hence the increasing concern, internationally, about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women in the workforce and on progress on gender equality in general.

Covid-19 has presented extraordinary challenges for colleagues – particularly those with caring responsibilities – across higher education and many other sectors. In the NUI Galway Covid-19 staff survey in June 2020, more female (47%) than male academics (31%) ranked caring responsibilities as their top challenge.

In light of this reality, research on the impact of caring on careers in HE, particularly women's careers, and my own experience of leadership roles in Irish HE, it behoves leaders in Irish HE to consider in some depth whether we wish to continue with the model of 'careless institutions' (Lynch, 2010). Their conclusions will have profound impacts on the future careers of women in Irish higher education, including the ability of women to gain and function in leadership roles in the sector. Refusing to engage in such consideration will have an equally profound effect.

Leaders of the Irish higher education sector were, until this decade, apparently completely oblivious to structural inequalities and to the exclusion and squandering of the leadership potential of up to 50% of its population across the diverse range of activities and services provided by the sector. Such an approach to the future leadership of a sector, where approximately 60% of the student body and over 50% of staff are women, is neither morally acceptable nor sustainable if the sector is to continue to flourish through this century.

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Four female leading lights in Higher Education



Professor Kerstin Mey
President of University of Limerick



Professor Maggie Cusack
President of Munster Technological University



Professor Eeva Leinonen
President of Maynooth University



Professor Linda Doyle
President and Provost of Trinity College Dublin



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

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- ▶ 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 (including IMI,
Irish Management Institute)



Maynooth University
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



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 Baincéireachta (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 provides an overview and summary analysis of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education (HE) in Ireland to date. It introduces the new National RPL in HE Project, whose vision is to make RPL an integral part of HE. It looks at why RPL is important for Irish higher education, and what actions are being planned to embed it systemically. RPL is a powerful resource that supports HE to progress a range of strategic objectives and makes access to lifelong learning a reality for many.

Introduction

The National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project is a four-year collaboration between the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA), encompassing 19 publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) and funded through the Human Capital Initiative pillar 3. The project seeks to extend what has already been achieved in HEIs and with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), as well as in the further education and training (FET) sector and through existing fora such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Practitioner Network.

Our vision is to make RPL an integral and vibrant part of a more flexible and inclusive higher education sector, one that presents lifelong learning opportunities of discernible value to learners, enterprise, and society in general. The project has two core beliefs: that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it, and that we should not require learners to relearn things they already know.

Reframing RPL as a powerful resource for higher education, rather than a burden, will be critical to our success. This article provides an overview and summary analysis of RPL in HE in Ireland to date and seeks to address two key questions: Why is RPL important for HE, and what actions are being planned in the new national project to embed RPL systemically in the policies, practices, and systems of participating HEIs?

RPL in higher education in Ireland – good, in parts

The expansion of arrangements for RPL has been included as an objective in national and European education policy for several years, most explicitly in the context of an overall vision of a

Enhancing the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Why and How?

Making the case for RPL as a powerful resource for Irish higher education



Grace Edge

Project Manager,
National Recognition of
Prior Learning in Higher
Education Project



Edwin Mernagh

Education and Training
Specialist

“ In Ireland, RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

society where lifelong learning is the norm (e.g., NQAI, 2005; European Commission, 2008). RPL makes invisible learning visible and thus ‘makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large ... [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market’ (OECD, 2004).

In Ireland, since the adoption of outcomes-based definitions of qualifications in the development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NQAI, 2003), RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning (formal, non-formal, or informal) that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

Formal learning is learning that has already been certified in an education system; non-formal learning is learning acquired through planned activities that does not result in formal certification (e.g., in-house work training or MOOCs), while informal learning is learning acquired through everyday activities, often unplanned and unintentional (e.g., on-the-job learning or learning through volunteer activities).

In higher education, RPL may be used for:

- access to a programme
- advanced academic standing for entry to a programme beyond year 1
- exemptions or credit for a module or a number of modules
- a full academic award.

Irish HEIs have been engaged in RPL activities for many years. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) report on RPL in HE reveals progressive development and excellent examples of innovative practice (Goggin et al., 2015). It also reveals, however, that the availability of RPL to learners is geographically uneven, fragmented, and difficult to navigate for both learners and staff.

At a sectoral level, the approach to RPL may be described as piecemeal, inconsistent, cumbersome, and sometimes unwelcoming for learners. As a key measure to improve this situation, the NFETL report identifies the need to develop a coherent and consistent sector-wide approach.

Why is RPL important? Is it a burden, or a resource to be optimised?

The range of learners seeking access to HE through routes other than direct school-to-college is varied and is changing rapidly. More work is required to better understand this diverse group, but a preliminary analysis of the categories currently identified (which of course overlap and intersect) suggests they include the following:

Mature students with lower levels of formal educational attainment

Recent research on mature-student participation identifies the flexibility provided by RPL as critical for underrepresented groups (HEA, 2021). In this context, RPL can be understood as a mechanism that can expedite progress towards mainstreaming equity-of-access goals and the target participation rates set out in the National Access Plan.

Holders of level 5 or 6 FET awards

Many of these learners seek courses cognate with their prior awards and may progress via HEI links with FET providers. Enhanced RPL services and opportunities would provide greater levels of access and choice for these learners and would support progress towards targets for FET award holders in HE.

Career changers or enhancers

These learners may present for RPL as individuals, as members of cohorts supported by companies, or through programmes such as Springboard. Some may seek entry to level 9 courses, perhaps not (exactly) cognate with level 7 or 8 awards already held. There are examples of standardised RPL channels designed for career-enhancing cohorts and of some customised HE programmes leading to new qualifications.

Portfolio builders

This category of learners has emerged in recent years with the development of career models based on multiple employments and 'portfolios' of work opportunities: people working this way assemble skill sets and qualifications that are varied and that require constant extension and updating. There is potential demand for HE courses and qualifications that are oriented to meet the needs of these 'new professionals'.

“ The range of learners seeking access to HE through routes other than direct school-to-college is varied and is changing rapidly.

These learners tend to be highly market-oriented, expecting to find clear information and transparent entry procedures for courses they might undertake. They are willing to use online learning opportunities; therefore, they have worldwide access to HEIs. They typically seek value for time invested – they are unwilling to waste time relearning what they already know.

Older students

This category includes people who have retired, but also many others who are not in the full-time labour force. It is a growing sector of potential participation in HE. Some of these learners already hold HE awards; they now wish to return to learning but are not necessarily contented with informal extramural programmes.

Already, many HEIs have identified demand for new or adapted programmes, as well as novel arrangements for access or progression, arising out of labour market developments and emerging new skills needs. Some of

these initiatives arise out of labour market activation measures, such as Springboard (an upskilling initiative in HE) and projects under the Strategic Innovation Fund (supporting innovation, collaboration, and reform in HE). Others are driven by industry or professional bodies' requirements in upskilling.

But perhaps the most significant development is the realisation that the HE students of today will not be 'one-shot' participants in a pre-career learning experience, as has been the case for most students until recently: rather, they will engage in multiple participations in HE as their careers evolve, building portfolios of qualifications reflecting their accumulating knowledge and experience. Several Irish HEIs are already engaged in meeting this demand and are offering micro-credentials in addition to the traditional ranges of HE degrees and diplomas.

“ The key message is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it.

All these emerging activities involve RPL at some stage; some are essentially RPL-driven. There is clearly a lot of RPL going on in HE in Ireland, and there is every indication that much more will take place in the years to come. It is imperative that we organise it properly and work towards an efficient, user-friendly, and quality-assured system to maximise the potential of these existing and emerging learner groups for the benefit of individuals, higher education, society, and the economy.

What actions are required to embed RPL in HE?

The key message from this analysis is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice focused on attracting diverse groups of learners and informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it. (This, for example, should lead to the elimination of words like 'non-standard' in relation to RPL application processes.) Policies should include plans to:

- establish the necessary structures and procedures to ensure that prospective students, employers, professional bodies, and others can easily access information and contacts
- build expertise in areas such as:
 - assessment and evaluation of informal and non-formal learning
 - the design of new qualifications of varying 'shapes' and 'sizes'
 - tailoring of programmes
 - to address required learning outcomes
 - for flexible delivery (e.g., not necessarily in traditional academic timetables, perhaps in compressed or intensive study blocks).

But can a HEI afford RPL? Apart from any direct additional costs, establishing RPL processes may often require reallocating resources and reorganising responsibilities. Recognising these challenges, initiatives such as Springboard allocate funding on the basis that use of RPL in recruitment for courses will require support. But the most realistic response to the issue of RPL costs is for the HEI to reframe the question: Can we afford not to do this?

HEIs that are already active in RPL development identify the cost and commitment as an investment in capacity, processes, and organisational structures that will reap a significant return:

- in the attraction of new, diverse cohorts of students
- in the development of career-long relationships with learners who will return repeatedly for upskilling, refresher programmes, career-enhancement qualifications, etc.
- in the ability of the HEI to participate in funded programme provision (both employer-led and via State schemes to address skills needs)
- in the ability of the HEI to build on its role as provider of ongoing upgrading and updating for programmes to occupational or professional sectors. There is particular potential in the development of strategic relationships with new or emerging professional areas – e.g., which HEIs will provide programmes to support the developing field of green energy?

Much of the investment involved in RPL is in the initial reorganisation and the establishment of a system to operate it within the HEI. Ongoing operating costs should be considered in the broader context of the returns from the new business generated, though a question remains as to the broader funding model and how this might support more RPL into the future.

“ The most realistic response to the issue of RPL costs is for the HEI to reframe the question: Can we afford not to do this? ”

As for the wider sectoral dimension of the task of embedding RPL in HE, the HEIs and their representative bodies are already working collectively towards this goal. The key action undertaken has been the establishment of the National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project. This joint THEA/IUA initiative is already under way. Several significant outcomes are anticipated:

- A new National Policy Framework in 2022 will provide the underpinning for action on RPL throughout HE. This will also address the multiple calls for a coherent national approach to RPL (Goggin et al., 2015; DES, 2011, 2016; Cedefop, 2018).
- The project will promote the development of a range of resources and materials (procedural templates, tools, case studies, etc.) that will help build capacity in the sector and will make the practice of RPL easier for HEI staff, particularly in relation to assessing informal and non-formal learning.
- Project leads are being appointed in each of the 19 participating HEIs. These key personnel will coordinate the streamlining of policies, procedures, and systems across their HEIs in a way that is coherent and consistent with the emerging National Policy Framework. To ensure that measures introduced are tailored to what will work locally, each HEI will be asked to identify steps to be taken to embed RPL into existing governance and quality structures.
- RPL in HE will be actively promoted, particularly to enterprise, in order to achieve the ambitious target of 6,000 annual RPL admissions by 2025.

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Celebrating the works of the 2021 graduation class at the Institute of Art, Design + Technology (IADT)



Aoibh Foynes from Laois, 22-year old graduate of Animation at IADT, watches as her final year project *The Big Head* is projected onto the wall of the Lexicon Library in Dún Laoghaire.

Micro-credentials are the latest shiny new thing attracting educators' increasing attention. Indeed, 2021 may become known as the year of micro-credentials. On the surface, the micro-credentialling movement offers great promise in helping to redesign and even reimagine more future-fit and complementary credential frameworks to enhance employability, continuous professional development, and the goal of a thriving learning society. But is there a danger that the micro-credential may be a wolf in sheep's clothing?

Introduction

In June 2021, Google announced 1,000 scholarships for free study for Dublin jobseekers (O'Dea, 2021). Successful recipients can complete a range of online courses delivered through Coursera. Google has a stated goal of disrupting established education models through its new Career Certificates, which it claims will be recognised as the equivalent of a full bachelor's degree for recruitment purposes (OECD, 2021a). Other high-profile companies are also offering new types of learning experiences that both challenge and complement the traditional university degree.

Removing the sheepskin

There is a growing sense that 'skills, rather than occupations or qualifications, form the job currency of the future' (Deloitte, 2019, p. 19). The 'sheepskin effect' of higher education, where its intrinsic worth has little to do with the time and effort that students devote to their studies but rather the parchment obtained at the end, is believed to be losing its employability value (Technológico de Monterrey, 2019).

Whether or not this is true, it is one of the reasons cited that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to develop a micro-credential strategy. There is evidence from around the globe that an increasing number of institutions are rushing to follow early micro-credentialling pioneers by repackaging their traditional offerings to prepare more work-ready graduates (Brown et al., 2021a). Cote and White (2020, p. 8) expand on why HEIs need to embrace micro-credentials:

First, traditional teaching and learning models have not adapted adequately to changing student demands and labour market needs. Higher education – particularly the university sector – has been confronted with a growing

Micro-credentials Untethered: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?



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list of critiques to the still-dominant, campus-focused program models: long and relatively inflexible programs; inadequate recognition of prior learning; slow or limited innovation in pedagogy; insufficient student supports for career-readiness; weak alignment to labour market needs; and a limited commitment to online and digital-enabled learning.

Beware of the wolf

Is it just another fad? In a stinging critique of micro-credentials, Ralston (2021, p. 83) argues that they are nothing more than a case of 'learning innovation theater'. At a deeper level, he argues that HEIs are selling their soul to business interests and market forces by unbundling the degree to quickly bolster their profits. According to Ralston, the emphasis on future skills is at the expense of educating the whole person:

The craze represents a betrayal of higher education's higher purpose and a loss for students and faculty who continue to see university learning as more than vocational training (ibid., p. 92).

“The concept of micro-credentials is not new... For decades, short courses have been an essential part of adult education and have had a prominent role in continuing professional education in many professions.”

This line of critique argues that the drive to unbundle the traditional degree can be traced to the forces of the 'neoliberal learning economy' (ibid., p. 83). From this viewpoint, higher education has become a form of a commodity, marketed and sold and acquired like any other. Wheelahan and Moodie (2021, p. 1), similarly, argue that micro-credentials are 'gig qualifications for a gig economy'.

While critique is usually a valuable source of insight, sweeping generalisations are unhelpful. Micro-credentials are being developed in multiple contexts with a variety of objectives, from fulfilling lifelong learning to broadening participation. They should therefore not be treated as a single uniform entity.

Charting the field

The field of micro-credentials is complex, and there is no global consensus on the term (Oliver, 2021). Confusing matters further, several other labels are commonly used instead of it or interchangeably with it. Despite this problem, many governments have been attracted to micro-credentials as part of their strategy to get people back to work after Covid-19 (OECD, 2021b).

In November 2020, for example, the provincial government in Ontario, Canada, announced \$59.5 million over three years for a major micro-credential development programme (Government of Ontario, 2020). The previous month an exciting Irish initiative was launched, with €12 million available under the Human Capital Initiative to develop a national multi-campus micro-credential (MC2) system over five years (IUA, 2020). The growing investment in this area is evidence that 'micro-credentials are seen as a valuable tool by institutional leaders' (OECD, 2021b, p. 3).

Interestingly, Usher (2021) describes the current attraction of micro-credentials as being like 'catnip to politicians'. While cats might be less

dangerous than wolves, there is a degree of memory loss in some of the claims about the potential of micro-credentials. After all, they are already ‘huge and hiding in plain sight’ (Matchett, 2021). An Australian study found there were 2.6 million people already enrolled in non-qualification ‘training bundles’, primarily to meet regulatory requirements in workplace safety, emergency preparedness, and authority to operate (Palmer, 2021). It also found that this market is largely ‘private’, with largely no government contribution.

In Canada, the St John’s Ambulance has been offering fee-paying short courses in basic first aid for well over a century. In fact, these courses were first offered in 1833, and now more than half a million Canadians annually seek to complete St John’s certificates (Toronto Workforce Innovation Group, 2021). In 2020, over 10,000 jobs posted online in Toronto were found to have required some form of first aid training.

Though we have limited data on similar courses in Ireland, the key point is that smaller formal and non-formal training bundles have existed for many years. The concept of micro-credentials is not new (Oliver, 2019). Hudak and Camilleri (2021, p. 5) reiterate this point:

For decades, short courses have been an essential part of adult education and have had a prominent role in continuing professional education in many professions. In diving instruction, vendor-led IT certification, and in medical continuing professional development, they are even the dominant form of education. The idea of ‘unbundling’ Higher Education into smaller parcels, functions and courses has been frequently mentioned in literature since at least 1975, while in European policy making the idea of offering short courses for reskilling has been present since at least 2001.

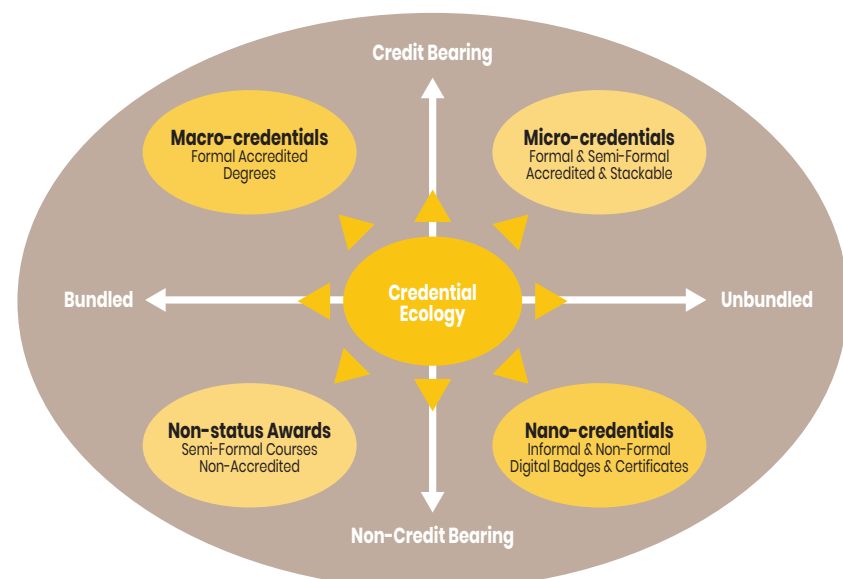


Figure 1: The new credential ecology (Brown et al., 2021a)

Remapping the landscape

An important distinction needs to be made between older and newer types of micro-credentials. Importantly, many of the older types appear to serve different purposes from traditional macro-credentials. They are often awarded by different types of organisations based on different standards, professional frameworks, or quality-assurance processes.

To illustrate the relationships between different types of credentials, Brown et al. (2021a) attempted to map the new and emerging landscape. Figure 1 presents four credential quadrants across two axes. At one end of the y-axis, we position traditional macro-credentials and credit-bearing micro-credentials. On the x-axis, we show the degree to which credentials and related units of learning are bundled together by the awarding body – in contrast, at the other end, to the level of personal choice that learners have over the make-up of their own learning bundle.

In this typology, micro-credentials are differentiated from other types of credentials on the basis of their unbundled, credit-bearing, and stackable nature. However, the distinction between quadrants is not as clear-cut in reality. To add clarity, the European Commission’s Higher Education Consultation Group on Micro-credentials proposed the following truncated definition:

“A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience.”

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. (European Commission, 2020, p. 10)

This definition makes it explicit that a micro-credential is a documented award by a trusted body to signify that a learner, upon assessment, has achieved learning outcomes of a small volume of learning against transparent standards and in compliance with agreed quality-assurance processes (Brown et al., 2021a).

Ideally, micro-credentials should be referenced to, or embedded in, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and in National Qualification Frameworks (MICROBOL, 2021). However, our Irish national survey of employers shows that this definition needs to take greater account of industry settings and workplace training (Nic Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2021).

Better plotting the literature

While progress has been made on the definition front, there remains a lack of data on the value of both older and newer types of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are largely data deserts when it comes to understanding tangible individual and societal benefits.

Accordingly, in 2021, we undertook a ‘state-of-the-art’ literature review on micro-credentials for the European Commission (Brown et al., 2021b). After following a tripartite methodological approach (Figure 2), we identified 149 relevant publications. A second set of inclusion criteria was then developed to screen those publications most relevant to Europe. This subsample (n = 45) is presented alongside the larger sample for comparison.

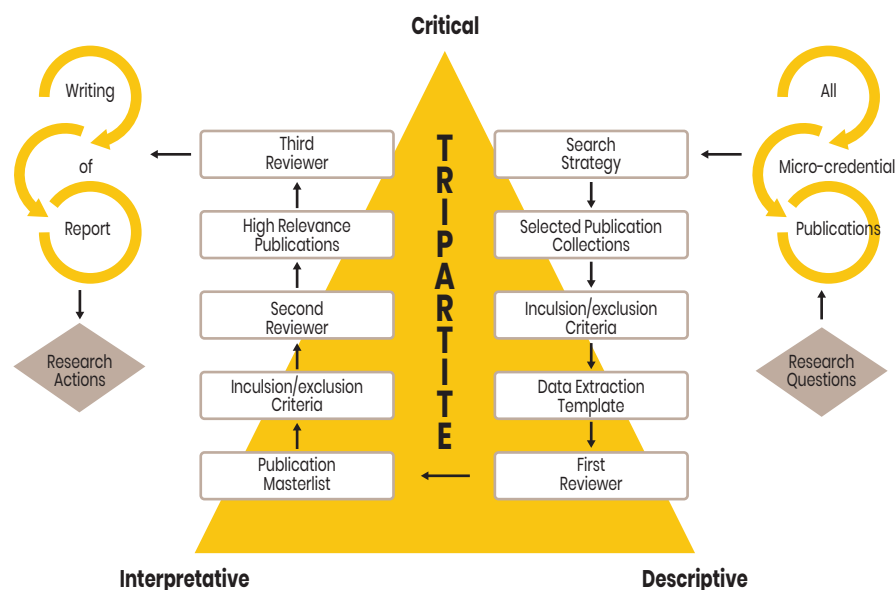


Figure 2: The tripartite methodological approach

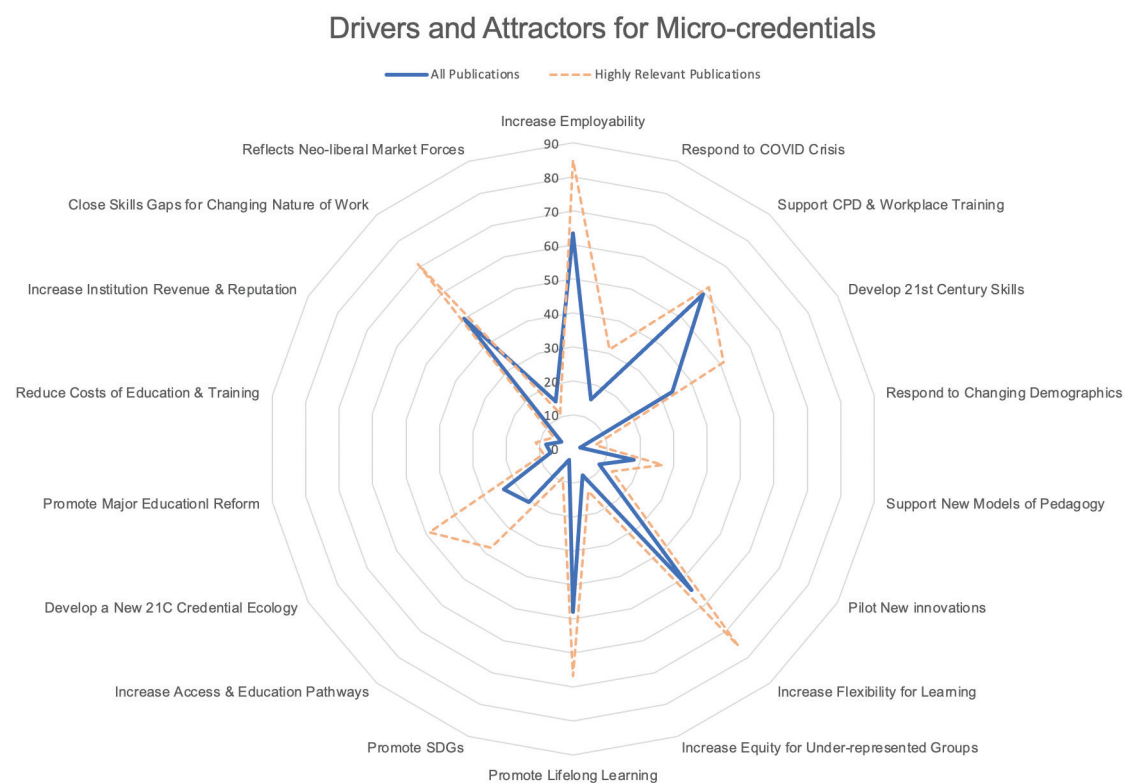


Figure 3: Drivers and attractors for micro-credentials

Figure 3 illustrates the drivers and attractors identified in analysing the literature. We found inherent tensions, mutually nested connections, and competing worldviews in the positioning of micro-credentials. On the premise that 'it is theory that decides what we can observe' (Stachel, 2002, p. 238), the literature serves to remind us that education systems consist of palettes with conflicting ideological, epistemological, and pedagogical assumptions. Though simplistic, at the root of these assumptions are two broad worldviews: the tradition of the learning society, and the influence of the knowledge economy.

Not surprisingly, a strong discourse on knowledge economy is woven throughout our analysis of the wider sample of literature covering areas related to employability (64%), closing skill gaps in response to the changing nature of work (50%), and supporting continuous professional development (CPD) and workplace training (60%). These drivers were often supported by publications making bold predictions; for example: 'around 85% of the jobs that today's learners will be doing in 2030 haven't been invented yet' (Institute for the Future, 2017, p. 14).

At the same time, understanding the rapid growth of the micro-credential movement requires a type of double vision, because imbued in the discourse are efforts to support new models of pedagogy (18%), increase flexibility for learning (54%), enhance access and new pathways to formal education (20%), and promote lifelong learning (48%).

From a learner perspective, micro-credentials are posited to provide the alternative approach to promoting flexible, accessible learning that today's learners increasingly require, because:

Frontloading skills and competencies through our schools and universities is not sufficient to prepare active and well-educated citizens for the rapidly changing nature of work and to actively participate in building a more sustainable future. (Brown, et al., 2021a, p. 2)

What is clear from the above drivers is that the competing languages of persuasion associated with the micro-credential movement are part of a complex milieu of change forces and social, cultural, and economic influences. Notably, explicit neoliberal economic drivers were evident in less than 15% of publications. While micro-credential drivers in the highly relevant sample centred on a wide range of societal issues, particularly employability (85%) and lifelong-learning-related agendas (67%), other key policy areas such as the Green Deal, equity, and social inclusion were only sparsely mentioned.

In search of greener grass

The answer to the question of whether micro-credentials are a wolf in sheep's clothing depends to a large extent on which underlying drivers you choose to emphasise. The lesson for Irish HEIs is to clearly define their own drivers and the outcomes they seek, rather than blindly following the rest of the flock.

A stronger focus needs to be placed on the demand side of micro-credentials, rather than adding to the supply with limited understanding

of the emerging market. It follows that deeper consideration of possible, probable, and preferable futures is required, because there are risks of unintended consequences, and the grass may not end up being greener.

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Seán de Fréine receives honorary doctorate from DCU

On 1 December 2021, Dublin City University conferred the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Honoris Causa) on Seán de Fréine. Receiving this award from DCU, Seán joins noted figures from politics, sport, literature and industry in. They include Jim Gavin, Paula Meehan, Micheál Ó Muirheartaigh, Sonia O'Sullivan, Bill Clinton, Seamus Mallon, David Trimble, and most recently Annette Kennedy and Vivien Lusted.

Seán de Fréine is a scholar and a public servant whose work has been of fundamental importance in the cultural sphere in Ireland for six decades. He has been a foundational influence on the sociolinguistics of Irish society and on questions of language policy. Since the 1960s onwards, his published work has been central to academic and public discussion of issues of language, society and identity in Ireland.

Prof Daire Keogh, President of Dublin City University, said:

"Seán de Fréine in his profession and passions has embodied the DCU mission to 'transform lives and societies'. Through his extraordinary scholarship and exemplary public service, Seán has made a unique contribution to the preservation and promotion of the Irish language, and to the development of Ireland's cultural life."

The small celebratory event took place in the Helix on DCU's Glasnevin Campus with a small group of Seán's family and friends in attendance. Traditional Irish music group, Na Casadaigh, composed and recorded a piece of music 'Ómós to Sheán' to celebrate Seán and to mark the occasion.



This article looks at the interplay between accountability and autonomy in university governance, and how this tension impacts on the management of universities and on the academic voice in the university and in public discourse.

University governance is an important issue for many reasons, not least of which is the centrality of academic freedom to democratic institutions. While university governance must provide for the efficient deployment of resources and the transparent use of funds – especially public funds – the focus on the university's moral purpose, particularly the requirement that it speak truth to power, must not be lost or diluted.

As Seery (2011, p. 28) points out, 'despite all attempts to reduce traditional liberal ideas to the science and technology of efficient delivery, value neutrality and evidence-based measurables, the view that education is fundamentally an ethical and moral undertaking is still widely held'. While Seery's comment has relevance to all education, its significance is all the more acute for higher education.

Nixon (2008) expects universities to contribute to the 'good society': one that aspires 'to be civilised, decent and just; civilised in its relationship between citizens; decent in its relations between institutions and their members; and just in its commitment to combat social and economic inequality'. In this construct of a good society, Nixon sees universities as the 'means whereby society understands itself, questions its values, defines and squabbles over its ends and purposes, and accrues the knowledge, understandings and insights necessary to inform the debate'.

Academic freedom is at the core of any such ethos. While the concept is not without complexities or limits (see for example Deeks, 2018), it is at the heart of a university's claims for the disinterested pursuit of truth. As expressed by the US Supreme Court, the 'nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth "out of a multitude of tongues [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection"' (cited in Euben, 2002). The practice of academic freedom usually means that:

Reflections on University Governance in Ireland

Navigating the accountability–autonomy continuum and the changing role of the university



Thomas Collins
Former Professor of Education, Maynooth University

- Faculty and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear or retaliation.
- It preserves the intellectual integrity of the education system, thereby supporting the public good.
- Faculty and students are free of governmental surveillance or censorship in their professional sphere.
- Faculty are not punished for holding contrarian or oppositional voices to university management.
- It provides for peer regulation in matters of academic quality – be it research, teaching, or scholarship.

With regard to institutional autonomy, the US Supreme Court (1978) has also recognised the First Amendment right of institutional autonomy, citing the four essential freedoms of a university as the right to 'determine for itself, on academic grounds, who may teach; who may be taught; how it shall be taught; and who may be admitted to study'.

So, in the context of this discussion, it is clear that the university's claim to public trust rests on its avowed commitment to a disinterested, impartial, critical, and civic-minded voice in the public discourse. The public therefore rightly expects the institution to act virtuously in the public interest. This expectation extends to include a requirement that the university act as custodian of the public good and speak out where that is being compromised or undermined.

“The focus on the university's moral purpose, particularly the requirement that it speak truth to power, must not be lost or diluted.”

Given such expectations, the task of constructing an appropriate governance model for universities is not without its complexities. A balance must be struck between, on the one hand, the needs of institutional autonomy and the protection of academic freedom for faculty, and, on the other, the public's need for accountability in the disbursement of public funds and for prudent and transparent internal management of the institution. With the passing of the Universities Act in 1997, the Irish state sought to square this circle by a reasonably sophisticated system of checks and balances in the institutional scaffolding of universities.

In his seminal study of higher education in Ireland, Clancy (2015) refers to Burton-Clark's 'triangle of co-ordination', whereby the co-ordination of HE systems can be best understood 'with respect to the relative importance of state authority, academic oligarchy and market forces' (p. 246). The contestation between these three differing forces is often publicly ventilated in Dáil Public Accounts Committee hearings where university management are brought face to face with the personal nature of public accountability in university management. In his review of the evolution of university governance in Ireland, Clancy concludes:

there is a clear pattern whereby universities have experienced a sharp decline in autonomy in the face of a more interventionist state, which seeks to define more precisely what their role should be and how their outputs should be evaluated. While for several decades this was a gradual transformation with periods of successful resistance by the academy, since the publication of the Hunt Report it has become the defining policy direction whereby institutional accountability will be measured with

respect to the achievement of objectives set out in performance contracts entered into with the HEA [Higher Education Authority]. (ibid., p. 270)

If this pattern is as Clancy suggests, it can also be posited that as state and market forces become increasingly preeminent in university affairs, this has facilitated – if not required – the rise in managerialism in the university at the expense of faculty. While both the Universities Act (1997) and the more recent Technological Universities Act (2018) accord statutory recognition to the Academic Council in both types of institution, in practice the sense is that the academic voice is increasingly displaced in the academy by a proactive executive thoroughly inserted into the realpolitik of the market, the economic drivers, and government funding strategies.

This leads Shattock (2017) to conclude that since the 1980s the ‘transfer to a “marketised” system of funding has changed the internal balances ... further strengthening the role of the executive and rendering both the governing body and the academic community increasingly dependent upon its expertise in managing risk, interpreting and exploiting the market and taking advantage of external opportunities’ (p. 13). Shattock bemoans this development, suggesting that ‘university reputation, research success and brand image are closely associated with adherence to an earlier governance model ... and that the loss of collegiality, the growth of top-down management and the disengagement of academics from the machinery of institutional self-government is prejudicial to academic performance’ (ibid., p. 16).

“Knowledge is essential, and we have both citizens and leaders who help us remember why. But knowledge without understanding is not second best; it can be downright harmful – Bergan

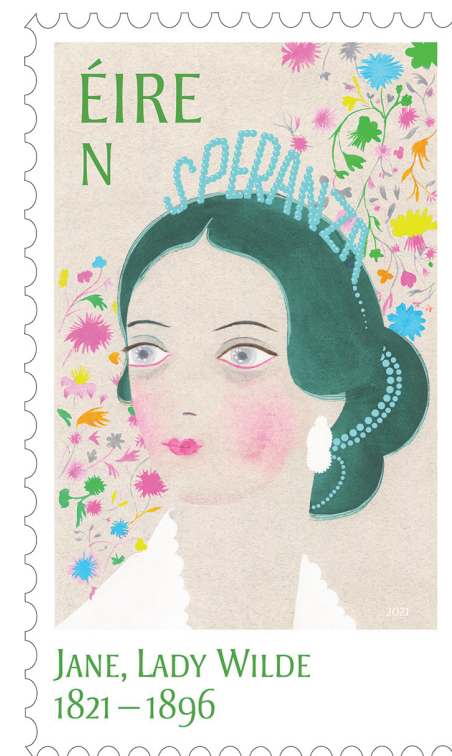
As Bergan (2018) suggests, with regard to the kind of higher education we need, ‘knowledge is essential, and we have both citizens and leaders who help us remember why. But knowledge without understanding is not second best; it can be downright harmful’ (p. 27). The university’s role in providing a safe space where truth can be spoken to power is one of democracy’s important safeguards and is an indication of the health of the democracy.

As countervailing, deliberative voices and institutions, particularly in the media, have become increasingly anaemic in western societies, it is important that the contrarian, thoughtful, and disinterested academic voice is reinvigorated such that, under the guise of accountability, the existential character of the academic contribution to a healthy democracy is not also lost.

[Note: This article draws largely on the author’s previously published work at Collins, 2019.]

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New stamp from An Post celebrates 'Jane, Lady Wilde'

In advance of International Women's Day on 4 March, 2021, An Post issued a new stamp celebrating the renowned 19th century Irish nationalist and feminist writer, Jane, Lady Wilde (1821–1896) whose pen-name was 'Speranza'.

Unveiling the stamp, Debbie Byrne, Managing Director of An Post Retail, said that Jane Lady Wilde was a woman who epitomised the meaning of #ChoosetoChallenge, the theme of this year's International Women's Day.

"She was a tireless and outspoken campaigner for women's rights, equality and other causes."

Aside from her writing under the pen-name 'Speranza', Jane, Lady Wilde was a multi-linguist, translator and staunch advocate of women's rights. In 1851, she married William Wilde, an ophthalmic surgeon, and their second-born son was the playwright and novelist, Oscar Wilde.

The appointment in December 2021 of Professor Mark Rogers as the interim president of University College Dublin means we have seen six university presidents appointed in the current calendar year. With pending appointments of two more in 2022 – to lead the recently established Technological University South-East Ireland (TUSEI), consisting of Waterford Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Carlow, and Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA), consisting of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, and Letterkenny Institute of Technology – we will have eight new leaders in our university sector.

Whereas all those in post today who were serving at the start of 2021 are male, four of the six presidents appointed in 2021 are female, which brings us within striking distance of a more balanced representation at senior academic level. Below are the biographical details of the current leadership team in our traditional and technological universities.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh

President of NUI Galway

Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh became the 13th president of NUI Galway in January 2018. Previously he was professor of accounting and dean of business at University College Dublin, leading its schools in Dublin (UCD Lochlann Quinn School of Business, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, UCD Smurfit Executive Development) and its overseas programmes in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

Having attended Scoil Iognáid and Coláiste Iognáid, Prof Ó hÓgartaigh is a first-class honours, first-in-class graduate of NUI Galway. He trained as a chartered accountant with Arthur Andersen and has a PhD in accounting from the University of Leeds. He has been published widely in the accounting field and has held academic positions at Dublin City University, UCD, and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

A former Fulbright scholar at Northeastern University in Boston, USA, he has served as audit committee chair at the Department of Marine, Communications and Natural Resources and as a member of the audit

Ireland's University Presidents 2022



Dr Brian Mooney
Editor



Professor David FitzPatrick

President of Technological University Dublin

committee at the Department of Finance. He has also served as an independent non-executive director of Avolon, one of the world's largest aircraft leasing companies, where he also chaired its audit committee. He is currently a member of the non-statutory board of the Saolta Hospital Group and chair of its strategy committee.

As president of NUI Galway, Prof Ó hÓgartaigh has maintained his research interests with his contribution on the history of financial accounting practice in *The Routledge Companion to Accounting History* (2nd edition, May 2020). He is a board member of the National Library of Ireland on the appointment of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Prof David FitzPatrick is the inaugural president of Technological University Dublin following its designation as a TU on 1 January 2019. He has excellent academic credentials, considerable experience at executive level, a significant international profile, and extensive industry experience, having managed the product development and research of orthopaedic devices.

Before assuming his role as president of TU Dublin, Prof FitzPatrick was a highly regarded principal of the College of Engineering and Architecture and dean of engineering at UCD, with responsibility for the strategic planning, personnel management, and budgetary performance of the faculty. Since 2014 he has also served as a member of the university's executive team.

Prof FitzPatrick holds a bachelor's degree in engineering from Trinity College Dublin and a doctorate in biomechanics from the University of Oxford. In the orthopaedic industry he worked initially with Howmedica International in Limerick, followed by a career with DePuy International in Leeds, which included managing product development, strategy, and research programmes for knee, upper limb, trauma, and spinal product lines.

In 1998, Prof FitzPatrick returned to Ireland to UCD's Department of Mechanical Engineering. He was promoted to senior lecturer in 2005, associate professor in 2010, and full professor in 2012. He served as head of the School of Electrical, Electronic and Mechanical Engineering from 2005 to 2011, followed by a period as vice principal for internationalisation and development in the College of Engineering and Architecture.

Appointed as provost of the Beijing–Dublin International College in 2012, he led the development of Ireland's largest dual-degree programme initiative in China and has continued in that role since becoming principal of UCD's

College of Engineering and Architecture, and a member of UCD's University Management Team, in 2014.

Professor Daire Keogh

President of Dublin City University

Prof Daire Keogh began a 10-year term as president of Dublin City University (DCU) in July 2020. A Dubliner, he is a distinguished historian who served as president of St Patrick's College Drumcondra and as deputy president of DCU after its incorporation in 2016. He has published extensively on the history of popular politics, religion, and education in Ireland. He is a fellow at the University Design Institute at Arizona State University and a founding member of the European Quality Assurance Register committee.



Prof Keogh is founding chair of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce higher education and research committee. He is a chartered director (Institute of Directors) and is a member of a number of boards, including the non-partisan Women for Election. A passionate educator, he plays a leadership role across the sector. He is a member of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, chair of the Board of Marley Grange National School in Rathfarnham, and a member of the board of management of Clongowes Wood College.

He served as a council member of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and as a member of the board of the Centre for Cross Border Studies (2012–2017). Prof Keogh is a graduate of the National University of Ireland (BA), the Gregorian University Rome (BPh), the University of Glasgow (MTh), and the University of Dublin (PhD) and is a former government of Ireland senior research fellow.

Professor John O'Halloran

President of University College Cork

Prof John O'Halloran became president of University College Cork (UCC) in September 2020. Before taking up this role, he served as deputy president and registrar since 2018. There he led the development and implementation of UCC's first Academic Strategy, setting out plans to reimagine the curriculum, transform assessment, and nurture graduate attributes to position UCC students for their future world of work. Having served as vice president for teaching and learning, and vice head of the College of Science, Engineering and Food Science, he is an academic leader with an ambitious vision for the future of higher education.



In all his leadership roles, Prof O'Halloran has delivered transformation through collaboration, including the evolution of a connected university, advancement of research, modernisation and enhancement of learning and teaching, development of digital education, curriculum redesign, lifelong learning, and staff development. He is committed to developing an inclusive culture for all students and staff at UCC, one where equality is upheld and diversity is respected. He is chair of the Athena Swan steering group, which secured a bronze institutional award for UCC in 2016 and several departmental-level awards. He is a member of the Top Management Programme Professional Reference Group of Advance HE, UK.

Prof O'Halloran is chair of the board of Fota Wildlife Park and a board member of the Central Applications Office, the NUI Senate, the Ludgate Hub, and UCC's Glucksman Gallery, among others. He is a judge for the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition and for the L'Oréal-UNESCO Women in Science Awards. He is the founding director of UCC's Quercus Talented Students' Programme and is co-chair and founder of the UCC Green Campus Forum, which has received many awards for its prioritisation of the green agenda, including the first green flag ever awarded to a university.

Prof O'Halloran holds the chair in Zoology at UCC and previously held academic posts at Colby College in the USA and at the University of Wales. He has published 250 research papers and several books on ecology, ornithology, ecotoxicology, and biodiversity. His research works focus on developing a deeper understanding of the impacts of ecological change related to land-use and climate.

Professor Cathal Kelly

Vice Chancellor of RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences



Prof Cathal Kelly was appointed CEO and registrar of Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) in December 2009. During his tenure, he has overseen significant strategic developments of RCSI, including the activation of its independent degree-awarding powers in 2010 and authorisation to use the title of university in Ireland in 2019, making RCSI Ireland's first not-for-profit, independent university.

RCSI was founded by royal charter in 1784 as the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and has had permission to use the title of university overseas since 2015. When authorisation extended to Ireland in 2019, RCSI became known as RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Prof Cathal Kelly is a graduate and fellow of RCSI and was dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences from 2006 to 2009. Previously he was a consultant general and vascular surgeon with a special interest in

endovascular surgery in Beaumont Hospital. He combined this role with chairmanship of the surgical division and an academic position in RCSI as vice dean for curriculum change.

In addition to completing his basic and higher surgical training in Dublin, Prof Kelly pursued a research fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He won the prestigious Patey Prize of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland for research he conducted at Beaumont Hospital. In 2021 his title was updated to include vice chancellor, reflecting his remit as the academic and administrative leader of RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Newly Appointed University Presidents in 2021

Professor Eeva Leinonen

President of Maynooth University

Maynooth University appointed Prof Eeva Leinonen, an international researcher and current vice chancellor, as its next president effective from 1 October 2021. Prof Leinonen succeeded Prof Philip Nolan, who led the university for the previous 10 years.

Prof Leinonen has held the role of vice chancellor of Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, since 2016, having previously been deputy vice chancellor (academic) at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales. Before moving to Australia in 2012, she was vice principal (education) at King's College London.

Originally from Finland, Prof Leinonen has a background in linguistics and psychology. She engages with researchers in Finland and Italy in ongoing research into pragmatic language development in children and contextual processing deficits of children and young adults with autistic spectrum disorders.

In accepting her appointment, Prof Leinonen said she was honoured to have the opportunity to lead this fine university in the next stage of its development: 'High-quality innovative education, world-class research that has positive societal impact, and transformational educational opportunities for all who can benefit irrespective of background are hallmarks of Maynooth University and resonate closely with my approach to university education.'



Professor Linda Doyle

President and Provost of Trinity College Dublin



Prof Linda Doyle was appointed by academic staff and student representatives as the 45th provost of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), coming into office on 1 August 2021. Prof Doyle's previous leadership roles have been as dean of research (2018–2020) and founder director of CONNECT, a national research centre co-funded by Science Foundation Ireland and industry, which focuses on future networks and communications. She was also director of the Centre for Telecommunications Value Chain Research (CTVR) and is currently a director of Xcelerit and Software Radio Systems, two CTVR/CONNECT spinouts.

Prof Doyle has served on many boards, including as chair of the board of the Douglas Hyde Gallery (2013–2021) and member of the board of Pallas Project Studios, KTH Sweden Scientific Advisory Board, and board of the Wireless Innovation Forum. Currently she is chair of the Ofcom Spectrum Advisory Board in the UK and member of the National Broadband Steering Committee in Ireland and the Open Research Europe Scientific Advisory Board. She serves on the boards of Science Gallery International and the Festival of Curiosity, an annual STEM outreach activity for children.

Before her appointment as provost, Prof Doyle was professor of engineering and the arts in TCD. Her expertise is in wireless communications, cognitive radio, reconfigurable networks, spectrum management, and creative arts practices. She has raised over €70 million in research funding and has published widely in her field. She has a reputation as an advocate for change in spectrum management practices and has played a role in spectrum policy at national and international levels. Combining creative arts practices with engineering for many years, she founded the Orthogonal Methods Group, a research initiative that works in critical and creative tension with technology to generate knowledge, insights, and alternative research orientations across disciplines sometimes perceived as mutually exclusive. Prof Doyle has given more than 100 keynotes and invited talks at events globally.

As well as her contributions to research and the arts, Prof Doyle is an active advocate for women in engineering and computer science. She has been involved in many initiatives such as Girls in Tech, Teen Turn, and HerStory. In 2017 she was recognised as one of the 10 women stars in the world working in networking and communications. She holds an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering from the National University of Ireland, and an MSc, PhD, and P.G.DIP. STATS from TCD. She is a fellow of TCD.

Professor Kerstin Mey

President of University of Limerick

Prof Kerstin Mey was appointed as University of Limerick's (UL) new president for a 10-year term on 8 October 2021. Prof Mey has served as interim president of UL since 1 September 2020. Before taking on the role of president, she held the position of vice president of academic affairs and student engagement at UL.

Prof Mey was appointed vice president and professor of visual culture at UL in April 2018, having previously held roles as pro-vice-chancellor and dean of the Westminster School of Media, Arts and Design and as professor of contemporary art and theory at the University of Westminster, London. She said:

Fifty years on, as a still young and dynamic institution, I want us to capitalise on UL's heritage as pioneer, entrepreneur, and disruptor. We have a major part to play in the social, economic, and ecological transformation of the mid-west region. It is an exciting time for us. Developing our city centre campus over the next period will enable us to strengthen UL's civil and civic mission, to grow connectivity and collaborations with communities, businesses, and industry as well as with Limerick City and County Council and to impact on place-making and the regeneration of the city and the region.

There are significant opportunities now to re-examine the higher education model in Ireland and preserve the learnings which have come from the impact on academic delivery and research during the Covid-19 period. We must weave what we have learned into advancing our working practices, transforming how we teach and learn and how we engage in research and knowledge exchange.

**Professor Mark Rogers**

Interim President of University College Dublin

Prof Mark Rogers is the newly appointed interim president of University College Dublin. Before his appointment he was registrar and deputy president of UCD, and he previously served as dean of science. He graduated from TCD with a first-class honours degree in genetics and completed a PhD in genetics at the University of Glasgow. Awarded fellowships from the European Molecular Biology Organization and the John Douglas French Foundation for Alzheimer's Research, he spent five years as a researcher in prion diseases in the laboratory of Nobel laureate Prof Stanley Prusiner.

Prof Rogers' research is in the area of scrapie in sheep and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle. He successfully licensed immunodiagnostic technologies that have been used in BSE diagnosis, resulting in over €2 million in royalties accruing to UCD.

With over 20 years' teaching experience at all levels from undergraduate to PhD supervision, Prof Rogers strongly promotes a student-centred and student-led approach to education that encourages independent learning. As dean of science and then as registrar and deputy president, he has recognised the need for educational programmes informed and led by research. Focusing on enhancing opportunities for students, he has simplified entry routes, promoted a student-centred approach across the university, and moved the university to an outcomes-based curriculum focus.

Professor Maggie Cusack,

President of Munster Technological University



On 1 January 2021, as Munster Technology University (MTU) was founded, Prof Maggie Cusack took up the role of inaugural president. Prof Cusack did her BSc degree in cell biology at the University of Glasgow. Her PhD at the University of Liverpool was a Tate & Lyle CASE award, where she studied the sweetest substance known (surprisingly, a protein called thaumatin).

Protein research brought her to geosciences at the University of Glasgow, where, as a postdoctoral research assistant at the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), she investigated proteins in brachiopod shells. At the University of Glasgow she held several leadership roles, including associate dean for

the Faculty of Physical Sciences Graduate School, international lead for the College of Science and Engineering, and head of the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences.

As professor of biomineralisation, Prof Cusack has broad and multidisciplinary research interests, collaborating with earth and biological scientists, materials scientists, isotope geochemists, chemists, and engineers and securing international funding as well as funding from four UK research councils: NERC, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, and Medical Research Council.

In 2017 Prof Cusack joined the University of Stirling as dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and in 2018 she completed the senior executive programme of the London Business School. She holds several external roles, including member of the Scottish government's STEM Strategy Advisory Group, chair of the Learned Societies Group, and member of the Royal Society partnership grants committee and the Carnegie Trust PhD committee. She completed a three year term as vice president (physical sciences) of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. She is the interdisciplinary advisor of REF subpanel B7 (earth systems and environmental science) in criteria-setting and assessment phases.

Professor Vincent Cunnane,

President of Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands
Midwest



Prof Vincent Cunnane became the inaugural president of Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) on 1 October 2021. Previously, Prof Cunnane was president of Limerick Institute of Technology, which he joined in September 2016 from Institute of Technology Sligo, and where he had been president since 2014.

Prof Cunnane was formerly CEO of Shannon Development (2008–2013) until its merger with the Shannon Airport Authority to form the Shannon Group. Before that, he was vice president of research at University of Limerick, where he also lectured and researched (1990–2008).

Prof Cunnane is an internationally renowned researcher in the field of physical electrochemistry. He recently stepped down as chair of the governing council of the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies after 10 years in the role, and he was also a member of the board of the National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training. He is currently chair of the Technological Higher Education Association.



Students Adam Lennon and Chloe Staunton avail of some of Trinity College Dublin's new sensory spaces

Trinity unveils sensory spaces to make campus more inclusive

In December 2021, Trinity College Dublin unveiled a series of new spaces on its city centre campus, designed as supportive sensory environments to meet the needs of students and staff.

Trinity Provost Linda Doyle welcomed the new spaces:

"This has been a return to campus like no other, at a time when students and staff have been under unprecedented stress. It is more important now than ever that everyone in the College community will have access to places around the campus where they can find respite to focus, or to relax in peace. The **TCD Sense Project** is a wonderful addition to our campus and will contribute to the health and wellbeing of all."

The plans were devised by TCD Sense - The Trinity Sensory Processing Project - which aims to make Trinity more inclusive by reviewing and improving new and existing spaces, building sensory awareness, and delivering specialist supports to students who experience barriers to managing and adapting to the sensory environments of college.

The project currently spans more than 80 study spaces in the library, sensory areas within four student social spaces, as well as individual sensory rooms. Hundreds of students are using these spaces every day, and many more are to come.

Trinity Student Union President Leah Keogh said:

"It has been a joy to work alongside the Disability Service on this project which has uniquely provided quiet spaces in busy places. The attention to detail is what has made this project so effective; the colours, textures and pieces were all hand selected to create the best possible environment for students to take some time out. This project has set the benchmark for what our student spaces should be going forward".

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Research

Ulysses Scheme now in its 25th year

At the launch of the 2022 Ulysses call:
H.E. Mr. Vincent Guérend, French Ambassador to Ireland,
Dr Marie-Luce Paris, University College Dublin,
Damien Henehan, IRC Programme Manager, Ulysses scheme
awardee.

Now in its 25th year, the Ulysses scheme provides funding to facilitate the exchange of innovative ideas and approaches between researchers working in Ireland and France. Named after James Joyce's famous novel to celebrate the Joycean links between Ireland and France, the joint scheme has funded over 700 awardees since it began.

Overview of the Irish Research System in 2021



Peter Brown
Director of the Irish
Research Council

Despite the severe challenges of Covid-19, the research and innovation system in Ireland continues to grow in exciting new directions. This article takes a broad view of the main current themes and developments in Irish research. It also provides context for the research chapter's individual articles and looks at how structure and policy changes will affect the research landscape in the coming years.

I'm delighted once again to introduce the research chapter of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* by Education Matters. Indeed, the Irish Research Council (IRC) is pleased to be supporting this unique publication that spans the entire education system, from preschool to advanced learning and scholarship. For research, it has been a year of continued resilience and, despite the challenges of Covid-19, some notable advances.

2021 has seen the research and innovation system continue on the path to recovery after a hugely challenging 2020, but there is no doubt that the impacts will be felt for some time, and in complex ways. Researchers in disciplines from architecture to zoology have continued to provide vital expertise to government and the public during this 'second pandemic year', and COP26 was a further reminder of how important research and science will be for decades to come.

In the introductory chapter to this Yearbook, Professor Philip Nolan, chairperson of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group and former president of Maynooth University, gives a striking account 'from the inside' of two years waging war on Covid-19. I concur entirely with his positioning of the pandemic in the wider context of our global ecological crisis, and indeed I concluded my research overview in last year's volume with the remarks:

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.

The present overview covers some of the hot topics in the research system this year, drawing on the excellent articles from the chapter contributors.

Resilience and progress

2020 was hugely disruptive for research and innovation, and all stakeholders worked closely together to minimise the damage and impact for research projects and especially for early-career researchers. Some level of normality returned for the 2021–22 academic year, with the reopening of campuses across the country. In this chapter, Dr Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha, project manager of StudentSurvey.ie, outlines the key findings of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students in relation to the impact of Covid-19. There is much food for thought in the findings, and the insights will be valuable for higher education institutions as they move forward.

Separately, the IRC looks forward to engaging with the results of a wider survey of the research community on the impact of Covid-19, jointly commissioned with Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Of particular importance will be the insights into how factors such as gender and disability have mediated the impact of Covid-19 on researchers.

For early-career researchers funded by the IRC, 2021 brought very good news with the announcement in January that the IRC postgraduate stipend and postdoctoral salary would both be increased. A long-standing priority for the Council and a key action in our strategic plan, the move received strong endorsement from Minister Simon Harris and the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and additional funding of €3.2m was made available.

“The IRC was pleased in 2021 to deliver over 40 additional postgraduate research scholarships to the technological sector.”

The postdoctoral salary is now aligned with the national Irish Universities Association (IUA) scale, while the postgraduate stipend funding for the two research agencies of the Department (IRC and SFI) are now aligned. Critically, the increase, which took effect from 1 January 2021, applied to all awardees within the normal funding period of their award as at that date, thus benefiting close to 1,300 early-career researchers in the system. The IRC recommended in its submission for the next national research and innovation strategy that for the longer term a national minimum stipend be adopted for postgraduate students and independently reviewed at regular intervals.

Also of particular significance in 2021 was the addition of another technological university (TU) for the new academic year, namely Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS). The three existing TUs will be followed in 2022 by the establishment of TUs for the west/north-west and south-east. Attracting, developing, and retaining excellent researchers in these new institutions will be key to driving research intensity and achieving statutory targets. The IRC was pleased to be able to respond to this agenda in 2021, delivering over 40 additional postgraduate research scholarships to the technological sector,

representing an additional investment of €4.4m. The IRC plans to make a further round of awards in 2022.

A supportive and open research environment

Reflecting and driving good practice is a recurring theme of the IRC strategic plan. Nowhere is this more important than in the research environment. A safe and supportive research environment is essential to allow researchers to flourish across the career spectrum and to ensure that the outcomes from public investment in research are fully realised.

Bullying, harassment, or sexual harassment (BHS) are not acceptable in any workplace, and the publication of the IRC's new policy in June 2021 reflects its responsibility to support a safe research environment, both as an individual funder and in collaboration with stakeholders in the higher education and research system. The policy sets out clearly the IRC's expectations about host institutions' responsibilities to deal appropriately, promptly, and sensitively with any allegation of BHS involving an IRC awardee. The policy also places new requirements on applicants and other applicant parties when applying for an IRC award, and this is being rolled out across the IRC's programmes. Minister Harris welcomed the new policy as another important step in the right direction to collectively tackling this issue.

“The challenge will be to achieve progress on open research in a way that works for all, including the arts and humanities.”

The IRC's policy underpinning support for awardees who have family or caring responsibilities was also expanded this year. Covering both paid and unpaid leave, the policy introduces a new layer of support for postgraduate students who have parental or caring responsibilities. This is important for individual awardees, but also more broadly to promote diversity and inclusion in the postgraduate research community. There continue to be large gender disparities in the distribution of caring responsibilities that disadvantage women in their careers. The IRC expects to publish the external review of its Gender Strategy and Action Plan by the end of 2021 or early in 2022, and this will be the starting point for developing the next strategy.

The IRC continues to engage with national structures on open research, in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders across the system. It is timely for this year's *Yearbook* to have a welcome contribution from Daniel Bangert, National Open Research Forum (NORF) coordinator. As Daniel notes, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of open dissemination of scientific research.

From an IRC perspective, with a mandate to support excellent research across all disciplines, the challenge will be to achieve progress on open research in a way that works for all, including the arts and humanities. Open social science data received a major boost with Ireland's new membership of CESSDA (EU Consortium of Social Science Data Archives), underpinned by the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) in University College Dublin (UCD) as national service provider, funded by the IRC.

Research and public policy

If ever one needed reminding of the importance of scientific and scholarly expertise to inform the development of evidence-based public policy, the Covid-19 crisis provided that reminder in spades. Mary Doyle, former deputy secretary general of the Department of Education, contributes to the research chapter again this year on this important topic. Her article lays down a challenge to researchers and policymakers alike to take steps that strengthen the connecting tissue between them.

The IRC was delighted to collaborate with the Royal Irish Academy this year, launching in September 2021 a joint outline roadmap for research for public policy informed by Mary's work. We were particularly pleased to have the endorsement for the paper of key agencies and groups, including the IUA, Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), SFI, Health Research Board (HRB), Campus Engage, and the Irish Humanities Alliance. The paper sets out recommendations for action for policymakers, higher education and research-performing institutions, and funders.

In November, Minister Harris announced his intention to begin reform of Ireland's scientific advisory structures, and the Council looks forward to engaging with the Department and stakeholders on creating a strong, agile, and durable statutory architecture for research- and science-informed policymaking.

Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, who completed her second term as Council chair in early December (see below), brings together the learnings of the Horizon 2020-funded SHAPE-ID project, of which she was principal investigator. Moving beyond lip service to interdisciplinarity and creating effective collaboration between disciplines and sectors continues to be a significant challenge, but one we must overcome to develop effective long-term solutions for the complex challenges that we face.

How research missions are developed and articulated; the design of funding calls, institutional culture, and policies; and support for research careers are all areas that require sustained focus on action if we are to create a vibrant interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research system, whose benefits will be seen in the quality of the solutions we seek.

Professor Yvonne Buckley, Irish Research Council laureate and Researcher of the Year 2021, and colleagues from the All-Island Climate and Biodiversity Research Network (launched by An Taoiseach in November 2021) pick up these themes in their contribution to this year's *Yearbook*. The authors put it succinctly thus:

A strong research ecosystem is needed to support policy and action for the societal transitions in decarbonisation and maintenance and restoration of biodiversity needed to underpin future economic activity. Research across multiple disciplines has several roles to play in the biodiversity and climate emergency.

“ The IRC continues to play a lead role in promoting interdisciplinary and intersectoral research collaboration, with another round of projects announced this year...”

“ All-island collaboration is shifting up a gear with the roll-out of the new research programme funded by the Shared Island initiative.”

The IRC continues to play a lead role in promoting interdisciplinary and intersectoral research collaboration, with another round of projects announced this year under COALESCE (Collaborative Alliances for Societal Challenges) and New Foundations civil society strand. We were particularly pleased this year to make awards once again in collaboration with strategic partners, including the Department of Foreign Affairs, An Taoiseach's Shared Island Unit, and the Policing Authority.

As we look to the next research and innovation strategy to succeed Innovation 2020, this year's *Yearbook* features a very timely piece from IRC member and Moore Institute director Professor Daniel Carey and colleague Steven Hadley. The article discusses the need for greater insights into the role and national contribution of the creative and cultural industries, and the opportunities for further development and innovation. These agendas, the authors argue, should be brought together and progressed as a distinct theme in the next research strategy, with investment in a centre dedicated to research, evidence, and policy in this area.

A vibrant and broad-based research system

Now, more than ever, we need a vibrant and broad-based research ecosystem, and the next national research and innovation strategy will be key to achieving this. Diversity of ideas, funding instruments, people, and places are all important aspects, as is collaboration between stakeholders, with excellence the common denominator.

Adequate, clear, and stable funding opportunities for individual researchers in any discipline are critical to delivering a broad-based and vibrant research system. Such opportunities enable researchers to develop their track record, consolidate their independence and international standing, and be competitive for key European or international grants, such as the European Research Council (ERC). The IRC opened a new Starting and Consolidator Laureate call for frontier basic research in 2021, open to all disciplines. The number of applications for this second Starting/Consolidator call represented a 49% increase on the first call, reflecting the growing ambition of excellent researchers in our system. The IRC looks forward to making the awards in mid-2022.

2021 saw an innovative collaboration between IRC and SFI with a pilot joint programme for early-stage investigators, across all disciplines. The call represents a welcome €23m commitment in emerging research leaders of the future, and there was considerable interest in the programme, with over 247 applications received. The programme provides researchers who are ready to transition to research independence with the opportunity to do, enabling them to pursue their specific research idea and fund an early-career researcher. Funding has been awarded under the 2021 call to 25 STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and 17 AHSS (arts, humanities, and social sciences) researchers with world-class potential. The agencies will be reviewing this collaborative call in 2022 and seeking feedback from the research community. This will inform future development in this area, subject of course to budgetary scope.

Collaboration continues to be strong across the system. Examples include the launch of the second phase of PPI (Patient and Public Involvement) Ignite, led by the HRB and supported by the IRC. Strong collaboration between stakeholders is evident across several areas of policy and practice (e.g., Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion; Campus Engage) and in the *Creating Our Future* campaign to engage the public and societal partners in a dialogue about research and innovation. All-island collaboration is shifting up a gear with the roll-out of the new research programme funded by the Shared Island initiative.

The Marie Curie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) pillar of Horizon 2020 continues to be the largest source of drawdown for Ireland across the H2020 portfolio and, along with ERC, plays a very significant role in supporting a broad-based research system in Ireland. The IRC is pleased to have signed a new partnership agreement with the IUA this year, with enhanced funding to target the engagement of new constituencies in MSCA opportunities. Dr Yvonne Halpin, head of the Irish office, outlines in this chapter how we can 'aim even higher' for MSCA for Horizon Europe.

Closing acknowledgements

I would like to firstly thank the contributors to the research chapter for this volume of *Ireland's Education Yearbook*. All articles provide much food for thought as this year closes and a new year beckons. I look forward to further engagement with contributors as part of the Education Matters summit in 2022.

Secondly, I do not wish to miss the opportunity in this chapter overview to acknowledge the contribution of the outgoing chair, Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, to the Irish Research Council over the last six years, together with outgoing members Professor Emma Teeling (UCD), Professor Felicity Kelliher (Waterford Institute of Technology), and Professor Rob Kitchin (Maynooth University).

Among the best facets of this job is the opportunity to work with people of the calibre of the Irish Research Council. Emma, Felicity, and Rob were immensely committed members, and they truly reflect what is best about the people in our research system – their creative thinking, their desire to see the system reach its full potential, their support for early-career researchers, and their commitment to research benefiting society and enhancing all our lives. As chair of the Council, Jane epitomised these values also, combining them with a business-like efficiency, a relentless energy, and responsiveness and willingness to help at all times. I wish her well in her many projects going forward.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to the staff of the Irish Research Council, including those who both left and joined the team this year. The staff work incredibly hard, mostly behind the scenes and out of the spotlight, to ensure that the agency continues to play a critical and unique role in the Irish research and innovation landscape across all disciplines and career stages.

Why Should We Care about Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity?

Radical solutions for the monumental global challenges we face

Today's societal problems are complex and multifaceted. Developing solutions demands a variety of disciplinary and practitioner approaches and perspectives. SHAPE-ID brings to the fore the importance of arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) in addressing these challenges in a more holistic and socially credible manner. The project seeks to improve pathways for inter- and transdisciplinary research, particularly between AHSS and STEM disciplines.

The most exciting and ground-breaking innovations are happening at the intersection of disciplines. We need to cherish and encourage this as much as we can. But right now, our current infrastructure dissuades interdisciplinary research. —Carlos Moedas, 'The New Republic of Letters', 2017

Introduction to SHAPE-ID

As the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and artificial intelligence all demonstrate, the problems of today's society are complex and multifaceted. Developing solutions demands a variety of disciplinary and practitioner approaches and perspectives. Inter- and transdisciplinary research (IDR/TDR) might just provide the radical solutions for the monumental global challenges that we face.

Shaping Interdisciplinary Practices in Europe (SHAPE-ID) is an EU-funded project that brings to the fore the importance of arts, humanities, and social sciences (AHSS) perspectives as essential for addressing such complex societal challenges in a more holistic and socially credible manner. It seeks to improve pathways for inter- and transdisciplinary research, particularly between AHSS and science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) disciplines.¹

The fundamental importance of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches is highlighted in Ireland's National Development Plan (2021–2030):

The development of new ideas and new thinking required to tackle complex societal challenges requires a diversity of perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. Engaging leading researchers from both Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (AHSS) and STEM can often generate more innovative solutions and new ways of approaching and thinking about problems.



Jane Ohlmeyer
Chair of Irish Research Council, Erasmus Smith's Professor of Modern History (1762), Trinity College Dublin, and Principal Investigator for SHAPE-ID

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals underpin both European and national funding agendas, and AHSS integration will be necessary for the delivery of transformational change. However, the potential contributions of AHSS disciplines are often poorly understood. SHAPE-ID has addressed this by launching a new toolkit that reflects the insights it has gathered from EU-wide workshops on all the ways AHSS can contribute in the context of inter- and transdisciplinary research. Collaboration with these areas is essential to really tackling many of the complex societal challenges.

There are enduring challenges for those engaged in inter- and transdisciplinary research, such as the policy and funding landscape, institutional structures, and the need for personal and interpersonal skills opportunities across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. But the possibilities are groundbreaking: climate scientists working with artists, computer engineers with philosophers, neuroscientists with dancers, architects with NGOs – all to address some of the world's most urgent dilemmas.

The SHAPE-ID project findings identify the main preconditions for successful inter- and transdisciplinary research, and group them under three headings:

1. Research policy and funding

First, the research policy and funding landscape matters. Long-term commitment is needed to support inter- and transdisciplinary research and capacity-building for it.² Second, challenge-led research questions create a good occasion for collaboration, but much collaboration starts from the bottom up, from curiosity, and from supporting basic research. Finally, how funding calls are designed, and proposals evaluated, is important. Co-design with AHSS scholars and experts can improve how problems are framed by funders, and inter- and transdisciplinary expertise is also needed in designing calls and evaluating proposals. With this in mind, a range of funding instruments are needed to build capacity and support more ambitious large-scale collaboration.

2. Institutions and disciplines

Higher education institutions and their disciplinary structures have a huge influence on researcher education, training, and careers. Inter- and transdisciplinary research is often seen as risky for early-career researchers because of the lack of viable career pathways.

3. Attributes, skills, and expertise

The attributes, skills, and expertise of individual researchers are critical. Inter- and transdisciplinary researchers need to be open, curious, willing to listen and learn, willing to leave their egos at the door when meeting others, and motivated to collaborate. Interdisciplinary teams also require a range of disciplinary expertise, integration expertise (people who can bridge the disciplinary knowledge), the involvement of relevant societal and enterprise stakeholders, and respect for their knowledge and experience.

SHAPE-ID recommendations

The SHAPE-ID project has summarised its key findings into five succinct recommendations:

1. *Promote socio-cultural missions and challenges:* Funders and policymakers need to commit to research and innovation missions driven by socio-cultural challenges and questions that foreground the human dimensions of challenges and put human flourishing at their centre.

2. *Co-design funding calls with AHSS experts:* AHSS researchers and societal stakeholders need to be consulted at an early stage in designing funding calls and programmes. Call language should be more open and inclusive, inviting a range of perspectives in addressing the topic and explicitly welcoming a broad range of contributions from AHSS and other stakeholders.

3. *Provide seed funding to enable relationship- and capacity-building:* Inter- and transdisciplinary research take time and trust, and the AHSS disciplines in particular require support to build capacity. Seed funding is needed to build networks, consortia, and relationships, including with industry and societal stakeholders, laying the foundation for larger-scale collaboration.

4. *Support a culture of IDR/TDR in higher education:* Culture change takes time. Policymakers and funders can support the development of inter- and transdisciplinary education and research in higher education institutions to build capacity from undergraduate to postdoctoral and faculty level, training in 'meta-skills', and developmental support for those in institutional governance roles.

5. *Fund sustainable research careers, networks, and infrastructures:* To facilitate knowledge-sharing and community-building across dispersed stakeholder groups, the European Commission and other funding bodies should provide sustainable funding for inter- and transdisciplinary infrastructure, building on the SHAPE-ID toolkit to create a more dynamic, interactive, and sustainable resource. Continuity of funding support is also needed to enable researchers to build inter- and transdisciplinary careers, ranging from curiosity-led through to challenge-led research.

SHAPE-ID toolkit

The key findings and recommendations compiled through literature reviews, surveys, and workshops culminate in the SHAPE-ID toolkit created to support inter- and transdisciplinary research in AHSS. It is the first toolkit on interdisciplinarity that explicitly focuses on integrating AHSS with other disciplines, and it outlines the tremendous benefits of such integration. It is designed to help researchers, universities, funders, policymakers, and societal partners to learn more about interdisciplinary research and take concrete steps to improve how they do it.³

The toolkit includes curated resources, case studies, reflective tools, and interviews with experts. The topics it covers include understanding interdisciplinarity; developing the skills needed to bridge disciplinary divides; developing an interdisciplinary career; and supporting, funding, and evaluating collaborative research. You can access the toolkit at www.shapeidtoolkit.eu. There is a wealth of resources to unpack, including:

- Case studies showcasing AHSS leadership in interdisciplinary research projects, including examples from the creative arts, funding initiatives that have supported AHSS capacity-building and leadership, and institutional case studies, including the Trinity Long Room Hub's own journey towards building capacity for interdisciplinarity.
- Reflective tools for researchers considering or beginning collaborative research, which can be used individually or as discussion tools to help think about whether this is the right path for you, what you want to gain by collaborating, and who you should work with to achieve your goals.
- 'Top Ten Tips' on writing an interdisciplinary proposal, developing an interdisciplinary career, and working in multi-stakeholder collaborations.
- Evaluator guides and best-practice recommendations for those tasked with evaluating interdisciplinary research proposals or projects.

Our guided tours for researchers and research leaders are a good place to start, and we have also created a guide for research development professionals to provide focused access to the resources most relevant for their work.⁴

Conclusion

We believe that the SHAPE-ID project and toolkit underpin EU and national policies to identify radical solutions for global challenges and to enable open collaboration within science and with other knowledge actors, including the involvement of citizens, civil society, and end-users.

SHAPE-ID provides support for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research across policy, funding, institutional structures, career development and assessment, open science, impact, global challenges, and societal partners. It has the potential to influence the transformation in universities by helping them reflect on their understanding of inter- and transdisciplinarity, assessing how established it is in their institutions, and recognising the steps needed to achieve best practice.

In short, SHAPE-ID and the toolkit represent a significant contribution towards achieving a more connected, inclusive, and efficient ecosystem that is truly inter- and transdisciplinary and one that embodies research, education, and innovation.

ENDNOTES

1. Horizon 2020 is the financial instrument implementing the Innovation Union, a Europe 2020 flagship initiative aimed at securing Europe's global competitiveness.
2. Highlighted in Mary Doyle's discussion paper 'Research for public policy and society: Building a stronger architecture for Ireland'.
3. The SHAPE-ID toolkit builds on the expertise of many partners: the development project was led by Prof. Catherine Lyall and Dr Isabel Fletcher at the University of Edinburgh, with support from the SHAPE-ID team in Trinity College Dublin, ETH Zurich, the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, ISINNOVA, and Dr Jack Spaapen.
4. We're delighted to share the SHAPE-ID toolkit with you and hope you find it useful. If you have questions or comments about the toolkit or any aspect of the SHAPE-ID project, please feel free to contact us at info@shapeid.eu.



Creating Our Future

Experiences from a nationwide research engagement campaign

The roll-out of the vaccine programme this year was a clear, visible, and unquestionably beneficial product of research efforts across the globe. Our research community has much to be proud of as well. It is an opportune moment to reflect on the direction of research in Ireland and to engage its people in a conversation about the future.

This past year we have all been involved in a large-scale government campaign, Creating Our Future. It was proposed by Simon Harris, Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, to involve the people of Ireland in a conversation about the role that research can and should play in addressing opportunities, challenges, and hopes for the future.

The campaign's scope included school visits and roadshow events in every county in Ireland, and the results were fascinating. With over 18,000 ideas submitted by the closing date of 30 November, the work now begins on analysing the data.

Inspired by similar campaigns in Flanders and the Netherlands, Creating Our Future sets out with the premise that everyone in Ireland could contribute ideas on how to make a better future for all. No one knows better, after all, what the best future for Ireland is than the people of Ireland themselves.

It will come as no surprise that health and wellbeing were core topics among the ideas submitted. The environment, sustainability, and climate change also featured very significantly. Accessibility issues were also prioritised, with many ideas focussed on the inclusion of neurodivergence and mental wellbeing in schools, workplaces, and society in general. But we won't have a clear picture until all the data is analysed.

The task of analysing the submissions now rests with an expert committee and expert working groups, chaired by Professor Linda Hogan of Trinity College Dublin. The overarching purpose of this analysis is to ensure that the findings reflect the public's voice and that recommendations are developed to inspire research in Ireland. This group of about 60 experts will analyse and interpret the information, draw conclusions, and develop a report for government and a book of inspiration for researchers.

The climate and biodiversity crises that threaten our way of life are fundamentally connected and operate beyond national borders. Solutions require fair and just societal transition and transformation. Large-scale, collaborative research across disciplines in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland is needed to develop joined-up solutions to the crises.

Connected crises

Biodiversity and climate systems worldwide continue to be degraded, with life-altering consequences for societies and people around the world (Pörtner et al., 2021). The drivers and consequences of Earth system degradation transcend borders and jurisdictions. The crises do not respect geopolitical boundaries, and therefore responses need to be collaborative and coordinated – particularly on an island with shared natural capital and flows of ecosystem processes, goods, and services.

Significant commitments to combat climate change have been agreed by governments worldwide (UN / Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015), and there is increasing ambition for tackling biodiversity loss (European Commission, 2020). 2021 is a critical year for biodiversity and climate issues, with the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) to outline a post-2020 global biodiversity framework and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) to accelerate action on existing climate commitments.

There are parallels between how we understand and tackle climate change and biodiversity loss. Importantly, there are also critical intersections and feedbacks between them. Some of the same activities, rooted in accelerating anthropogenic alterations of Earth systems, are driving climate and biodiversity change, and some solutions could result in trade-offs or synergies between climate and biodiversity actions.

Adapting to and mitigating climate change will not necessarily come at the expense of biodiversity. There are undoubtedly win-win outcomes that benefit biodiversity and at the same time provide nature-based solutions to help us mitigate and adapt to climate change. These links mean that the two crises should be tackled together.

For example, vast tree-planting programmes – a nature-based solution – have been proposed

Joined-Up Thinking to Tackle the Climate and Biodiversity Crises

Shared research needs for a green-knowledge-based future



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to sequester carbon and reduce the effects of climate change. But while forest restoration has the potential to support biodiversity, if implemented incorrectly it could have the opposite effect and may also fail to achieve its carbon-sequestration targets (Veldman et al., 2019). At the same time, biodiversity, and its role in providing nature-based solutions, is just part of the solution space needed for climate change.

Combining capabilities

Different groups in society have common but differentiated responsibilities to act, for example through policy levers, innovations in the built and physical environments, and development of technology in combination with nature to provide solutions to the crises. Mechanisms for a just transition are needed to recognise and reduce power imbalances among stakeholders. There needs to be joined-up thinking across disciplines, focused on the climate and biodiversity crises, leading to better outcomes for both.

The island of Ireland contains many critical ecosystems that underpin a wide range of services vital for the economy and society, including grasslands, forests, wetlands, peatlands, agricultural lands, and freshwater, coastal, and marine habitats. The island's natural capital and industrial and land-use profiles, together with political, economic, demographic, cultural, and societal features, present unique challenges and opportunities for ensuring that societal transitions to net-zero carbon are fair and just, leaving no-one behind (UNSDG, 2019), while protecting and restoring biodiversity and associated habitats to prevent further degradation.

“2021 is a critical year for biodiversity and climate issues, with the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) to outline a global biodiversity framework, and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) to accelerate action on existing climate commitments.”

The All-Island Climate and Biodiversity Research Network (AICBRN) was established in December 2019 to leverage the combined research and development capability across the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland and help tackle the climate and biodiversity emergencies (AICBRN, 2021). It draws together researchers from disciplines across the natural sciences, social sciences, engineering, and humanities, and has identified the need for enhanced research on climate, biodiversity, and the just transition required to implement solutions fairly across society.

The AICBRN brings together researchers to optimise existing research investments, identify critically needed infrastructure, and develop teams capable of not only addressing the challenges but also combining expertise to secure research funding, including European and private-sector funding, adding further value to national and internationally funded research programmes (Buckley et al., 2021).

Policy base

There is a strengthening policy base for climate action in both jurisdictions in Ireland. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill in the Republic of Ireland sets legally binding targets for the transition to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable, and climate-neutral economy by 2050 (Government of Ireland, 2021). The National Adaptation Framework sets out Ireland's strategy to reduce vulnerability to the negative effects of climate change and avail of positive

impacts (Government of Ireland, 2018). Actions across multiple sectors are set out in the Climate Action Plan (Government of Ireland, 2019).

The UK Climate Change Act 2008 has recently resulted in the Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (2019–2024) (NICCAP), where the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) coordinates a cross-departmental response to risks and opportunities relevant to NI in the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment.

Northern Ireland currently has two climate change bills under consideration. The first aims to mitigate the impact of climate change in NI, by establishing legally binding net-zero-carbon targets, and will establish an NI Climate Office with an associated Climate Commissioner who will have appropriate powers to implement change. The bill also includes legally binding targets for water quality, soil quality, and biodiversity.

The second bill focuses exclusively on climate. It aims to set targets for 2030, 2040, and 2050 for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and to provide for a carbon budgeting system that can enable reporting against those targets and imposes climate-change reporting duties on public sector bodies.

Research scope

A strong research ecosystem is needed to support policy and action for the societal transitions in decarbonisation and maintenance and restoration of biodiversity needed to underpin future economic activity. Research across multiple disciplines has several roles to play in the biodiversity and climate emergency:

1. To understand the mechanisms driving climate and biodiversity change and the consequences of the climate and biodiversity crises, and to better understand past and present Earth systems and the interaction of human societies with the natural world.
2. To use this understanding to develop narrative and digital models of Earth and societal systems, and to use these models to forecast or explore potential future scenarios.
3. To develop integrated solutions to mitigate climate and biodiversity change.
4. To develop solutions to adapt to the consequences of biodiversity and climate change.

To make progress on national and international requirements for biodiversity and climate research over the next decade, we must expand our research ambition, funding, and capacity. Opportunities for an interdisciplinary, collaborative, solution-based approach to the crises include: turning bogs from carbon sources to carbon sinks, multi-purpose forest plantings, biodiverse grasslands, a livestock industry based on year-round grazing on permanent pasture, ailing water infrastructure, high coast-to-inland ratio, and extensive marine areas.

Solutions to challenges, and responses to opportunities, require engaged research to develop creative and just-research-based solutions together with their uptake and impact. Ireland presents an ideal opportunity because of its relatively small size and position in the North Atlantic, a region increasingly impacted by climate change, yet possessing an array of critical ecosystems shared with multiple jurisdictions. This provides a platform to demonstrate and test solutions that are globally relevant. The AICBRN aims to enable and direct the cross-jurisdictional collaboration and activity that places sustainability-based research on a globally relevant footing.

Although a range of exciting, innovative, and useful research programmes relevant to the climate and biodiversity crises are under way, these are currently funded via different mechanisms and schemes. Expertise, infrastructure, and capacity in relevant fields are separated by disciplinary boundaries and dispersed across multiple research-performing organisations. Research groups largely work apart, leading to redundancies and under-exploitation of the synergies required to solve large-scale research challenges. Funding models support short-term piecemeal research when they should support collaborative research to realise significant progress on ambitious objectives.

Multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches are necessary to develop the understandings that are needed to design systemic solutions through to practical application and social acceptance. Despite the unprecedented scale and urgency of the challenge in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, we do not currently have a centralised or coordinated national capability in biodiversity and climate research.

There are several international models for building excellent national capability in climate and biodiversity research. One is the Helmholtz Earth and Environment research programme ‘Changing Earth – Sustaining our Future’. Helmholtz is Germany’s largest research organisation and operates a unified programme of research across seven Helmholtz Centres.

The Earth and Environment programme has an annual basic funding budget of ca. €525 million, which rises to €744m through the capture of additional third-party funds (Helmholtz, 2021). Given the disparity in population size between the island of Ireland (6.8 million) and Germany (83 million), this would be the equivalent of a €43m basic annual budget if a similar per capita level of investment was available across the island. In comparison, funding from the Environmental Protection Agency in Ireland in 2019 for new grants across all areas of environmental research was €10m (EPA, 2020) and comprised short-term grants to individual research groups or small consortia.

Other research funding organisations do not have dedicated biodiversity and climate research funding. This low level of funding for climate and biodiversity research is matched by a lack of coordination and collaboration between research groups. There is presently little incentive to work in

“Despite the unprecedented scale and urgency of the challenge in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, we do not currently have a centralised or coordinated national capability in biodiversity and climate research.”

larger multi-, inter-, or transdisciplinary consortia on more ambitious projects that address the challenges at appropriate scales.

Conclusion

An all-island research capability in climate and biodiversity research is needed to capitalise on the opportunities brought about by a shift to a more sustainable economy. There is a first-mover advantage in developing and rolling out solutions, particularly for industries and businesses that need local-context-dependent solutions to decarbonisation and biodiversity conservation and restoration.

Both jurisdictions have relatively unique sectoral structures, with strong reliance on natural-capital-intensive industries (agriculture, tourism, marine) and a long and shared history of human-modified landscapes, presenting globally unique challenges. The island's marine resources are important economically, politically, and as a source of solutions to the climate and biodiversity crises.

The next decades will see unprecedented changes to the world's socio-economic and environmental systems. It is clear we need to switch to a green-knowledge-based economy, and researchers throughout Ireland must respond to emerging knowledge needs. The research sector, like others, needs to change business models, invent new ways of operating, and find new opportunities for sustainable development. Research across the island has the potential to underpin our shared economic, social, and environmental transitions in a way that is globally relevant.

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Peter Brown, Director of the Irish Research Council (IRC), with the winners of the IRC Researcher of the Year Award: Professor Yvonne Buckley and Dr Kathy Ruddy Trinity College Dublin, and Professor Michelle Norris University College Dublin.

This article identifies the importance of strengthening the connections between research and policy in an Irish context, and reviews the development of this national conversation during 2021. It considers a range of measures for making progress and highlights the recommendations of the Research for Public Policy roadmap recently published by the Irish Research Council and the Royal Irish Academy as identifying important pathways for future action.

Goal 2: A Connected Research System: Support a highly collaborative research system – closely connected with enterprise, public policy and practice, community and voluntary, innovation districts, national, regional and local interests; driving knowledge-creation, innovation and human capital; and contributing significantly in addressing major societal challenges. (DFHERIS, Statement of Strategy 2021–2030, p. 10)

Introduction

In my article for *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020*, entitled 'Strengthening the connections between research and policy in Ireland: Designing the infrastructure for an importance national resource', I made the case for strengthening the architecture in place to better align the national research ecosystem in support of public policy. To make progress on this agenda, I suggested that action needs to be initiated, led, and managed in three distinct but overlapping spaces:

- in the research community itself and particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs)
- in our institutions of democracy, specifically in government and parliamentary machinery
- in the combined efforts of research funders.

Importantly, all three must then collectively design an architecture that enables them to engage positively with each other. I described the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), with its commitment to develop a national strategy for research, innovation, science, and technology and its national research engagement campaign, as offering an exciting opportunity to identify the future research needs, policy questions, structures, and supports

Research for Public Policy: A Framework for Action in Ireland

Developing the Irish research ecosystem as an important national resource to address major societal challenges



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to strengthen the policy–research interface in support of Ireland's national ambitions.

In this article, I want to review the developments of the past year to support this dialogue and to raise some issues and questions to guide consideration of the next steps.

How research can enhance policymaking in the changing global context

I would like to begin by briefly recalling the reasons this is an important national agenda for Ireland.

Ireland faces new and significant policy challenges and choices as we move into a post-Brexit, post-pandemic environment and as we look to build our influence at EU and international levels. These will require knowledge, expertise, and leadership from across multiple government departments and fields of knowledge. Resolving them will often require unprecedented levels of public awareness and support for what can be unpalatable but necessary policy directions in the longer term.

Ireland's higher education and research system is an extremely valuable resource for a small country and has significant untapped potential to contribute in a positive and dynamic way. To make the right decisions on complex issues, Irish policymakers need access to the best and most up-to-date information, much of which will have to come from many different fields of research and knowledge.

Ireland's higher education and research system is an extremely valuable resource for a small country and has significant untapped potential to contribute in a positive and dynamic way.

Developments in 2020–21

This agenda has been recognised as important, and progress has been made in a number of areas during 2021. Important contributions have been made to the debate by a number of stakeholders, including the following:

- DFHERIS Statement of Strategy 2021–2023, which has identified specific goals in this area¹
- The 2021 Irish Research Council (IRC)/Royal Irish Academy (RIA) series 'Research for Public Policy: Opportunities for Ireland' was addressed on this topic by a number of high-profile research and education leaders
- The subsequent publication on 8 September 2021 of 'Research for Public Policy: An Outline Roadmap'
- Publication of Campus Engage policy briefing for HEIs: 'Society and Higher Education Addressing Societal Challenges Together'
- Publication of the final SHAPE-ID toolkit in June 2021, which supports a systematic approach to multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and was funded under Horizon 2020.
- The 'Review of Ireland's higher education research system' by the Higher Education Research Group, published in September 2021.

I will now look in particular at the Research for Public Policy roadmap published by the IRC and RIA, which sets out an important framework for future action in this complex area.

Research for Public Policy roadmap

On 8 September 2021, the IRC and RIA published a detailed Research for Public Policy roadmap, which was designed to identify and bring together the key themes that emerged from recent joint work on 'Research for Public Policy: Opportunities for Ireland'.

The roadmap notes that although multiple sources of valuable policy advice exist in Ireland, the pathway for contributing to policy formation remains narrow compared with some other European countries. The challenge therefore is to create an adept and responsive system that enhances the public good by addressing several needs that have been identified in the course of the webinar series.

The roadmap sets out an ambitious programme of work across a range of stakeholders to move this agenda forward. It identifies three key pathways for the future:

Pathway 1: Building bridges, creating trust, offering opportunities

Pathway 2: Joining up and scaling up what already exists

Pathway 3: Knowledge management and brokerage.

The roadmap is designed to offer an ambitious route to enhancing the activities, interactions, and connections needed to support informed policy discussion for the public good; to show innovative leadership in designing responses to societal challenges by facilitating structured conversations between government and researchers; and to situate Ireland as an international leader and develop its influence as a provider of evidence-informed policy insights on shared global challenges.

What are the immediate next steps?

I suggest that the following priority actions would support the building of the necessary architecture in a practical and immediate way:

- Create mechanisms, including the role of chief science advisor, which are credible, authoritative, based on expertise, and tap into the best that is available to the country, whether located in higher education, public research organisations, the private sector, or the third sector.
- Capacity-building for policymakers for this work could be supported through the Public Sector Reform framework and Civil Service Renewal programme. Capacity-building for the academic community could be supported through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), research funders, higher education institutions, and the RIA.
- The existing research funders should play a central role in this mechanism and could, for example, come together to provide a joint

“ The government needs to be able to access a broader range of experts in such a way that these experts are working together in the public interest. ”

secretariat in support of its work, with additional involvement from stakeholders such as the RIA, Irish Universities Association (IUA), and Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

Underpinning all this work is the important role of DFHERIS in providing the foundations and the 'glue' to lead and support activity across the landscape.

The ultimate goal

In the future, the government needs to be able to access a broader range of experts in such a way that these experts are working together in the public interest. At the end of this journey, a great outcome would be if the Irish research ecosystem in place would support the following objectives:

- identify sources of research for public policy generated by Irish HEIs and other contributors that may currently be overlooked or underused
- produce engaged research for policy transformation on cross-cutting societal challenges
- provide the training and rewards to encourage researchers in HEIs to engage in research for public policy
- connect researchers and policymakers to embed engaged research in strategic policy planning and formulation
- ensure a spectrum of advice across the natural and life sciences, technology, arts, humanities, and social sciences disciplines, recognising the need for an integrated approach to address societal challenges
- create a vibrant space, supported by academics and government departments, for engaging with each other and with the public in research design and creation.

It is clear that Irish researchers and policymakers will benefit greatly from strengthening these arrangements for creating, analysing, and synthesising knowledge.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, Goal 4: Contribute expertise on National Priorities, including Climate Action: 'Lead our sectoral contribution to Ireland's Climate Action Plan and other national challenges, including by harnessing Ireland's research and scientific expertise to engage and inform the public and provide evidence-based input to policy development and evaluation.'



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Ireland's Creative and Cultural Industries

Policies, evidence, and research possibilities

The creative and cultural industries in Ireland have been the subject of policy discussion, but definitions remain inconsistent. This article reviews existing contributions, the evidence for the industries' economic significance, and the potential for further research.

Introduction

Ireland's association with creativity is well established in the public imagination both within and beyond the country, bound up with remarkable achievements in literature, drama, film, and music. The Arts Council of Ireland, focusing on arts organisations, individual artists, and groups, provides extensive funding to sustain a pipeline of new work across a range of art forms. These things are well known. But when it comes to defining and understanding the creative and cultural industries in Ireland, matters become more obscure.

What exactly are the creative and cultural industries? What contribution do they make to the Irish economy? The tendency to conflate creative with cultural industries (and indeed to use the terms 'art' and 'culture' interchangeably) merely adds to the confusion. This short piece sets out some definitions, looks at sources of insight and direction in policy, and asks what role might be played by universities and funders in fostering research and education in these areas.

Definitions and categories

Perhaps inevitably, given what was initially intended as a branding exercise, contrasting and contested definitions abound for the 'creative industries', 'cultural industries', and 'creative economy' (see, e.g., Lash & Urry, 1994; Howkins, 2001; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; UNCTAD, 2008).

Future Jobs Ireland, in its 2019 report, set out as one of its deliverables to 'Identify opportunities in the wider creative industries sector and develop a roadmap for the support and enhancement of these industries' (Government of Ireland, 2019b, p. 40). The roadmap is still pending, but Creative Ireland, which has taken on the responsibility, defines the areas it will concentrate on. They include design-based companies (such as industrial design, product design, web design and visual communications, UI/UX [user interface/user experience] design, and software design);



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‘digital creative’ enterprises, including gaming, post-production, and visual effects; and what they call content creation industries, which include advertising, apps, and AR/VR (augmented and virtual reality) (Government of Ireland, 2020a).

Notice, however, that while these categories are porous, they do not include theatre companies, publishing firms, companies running festivals, film production, the work of artists, galleries, or the music industry (although some technical aspects of production overlap, to a certain extent). These activities are the terrain of the cultural industries.

In practice, people tend to jumble the creative and cultural industries together. But they need to be disaggregated if only to track differences in the policies and aspirations associated with them. It’s instructive, for example, that the roadmap anticipated by Future Jobs Ireland focuses on technical fields and what might be termed applied forms of creativity – in other words, the commercial dimension of creativity.

In fact, the tension in what *creative industries* refers to surfaces in key policy documents issued by the Irish government. Innovation 2020 (whose successor is currently in preparation) contains no mention of the creative industries. It does allude to Ireland’s ‘creative economy’, with design upheld as the preeminent feature, relevant to medical and electrical devices, food products, construction, and consumer goods. And it does acknowledge that design extends to ‘emerging creative sectors such as graphics, film and animation, web interface and ICT design, costume and set design, organisational and service design and even food design, where future growth, exports and job creation are expected to be greatest’ (Government of Ireland, 2020b, p. 32).

“ Innovation 2020 contains no mention of the creative industries... By contrast, Culture 2025 adopts a far wider definition that takes in not just industries but occupations. ”

By contrast, Culture 2025 (originally published in 2019), from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, adopts a far wider definition that takes in not just industries but occupations. While it focuses on ‘creativity as a means to deliver commercial success, export growth and resilient employment’ (Government of Ireland, 2019a, p. 7), citing areas such as advertising and marketing alongside crafts, design, IT, fashion, film, TV, radio, and photography, it also includes publishing, museums, galleries, libraries, music, and the performing and visual arts. As Hadley et al. (2020) note:

It is telling that the more expansive definition of creative industries in Culture 2025 differs from the DAHG [Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht] (2015) definition in its framing of the creative industries through an explicitly evaluative lens as those ‘industries and occupations which focus on creativity as a means to deliver commercial success, export growth and resilient employment for Ireland’.

Such policies, and the definitions they rely on, matter, because they shape expectations and priorities in government, investment plans, and the resources made available to national funders.

Those who advocate for the arts – for film, music, dance, drama, visual arts, and so on – understandably appeal to the category of the creative industries to enhance the prestige of their work and to foreground its contribution to the economy. Here we encounter the problems of determining how wide a definition of the industry to use, and more fundamentally the lack of reliable data to go on.¹

Indeed, the lack of a robust, categorically precise, and longitudinal empirical basis for debate and policymaking appears to be endemic in the sector. The National Campaign for the Arts in Ireland (2021) has recently noted the arts sector’s reliance on ‘out-of-date, unreliable statistics to communicate valuable information about our sector’. The significance of collecting, analysing, and using data to inform decision-making was a recurrent theme of the DAHG (2015) Value for Money and Policy Review of the Arts Council report.

Research base

We have nothing like Nesta in the UK or the research conducted by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport there. The DCMS concluded in its most recent report that the creative industries contributed £115.9bn to the UK economy in 2019, accounting for 5.9% of GVA (gross value added). This sector ‘increased by 5.6% between 2018 and 2019 and by 43.6% between 2010 and 2019 in real terms’ (DCMS, 2019). The DCMS notes, by way of comparison, that in the UK the construction industry contributed £129.3bn, the automobile industry £49.1bn, and agriculture £13bn. Its figures for the cultural sector as a defined area show that it contributed £34.6bn in 2019.

“ The wide compass of Culture 2025 is welcome, but what we really need are the statistics to go with it. ”

One benefit of the DCMS approach is that it has published its definitions and methodologies. The standardised (and increasingly globally exported) definition of the creative and cultural industries remains the DCMS’s, which, as of 2015, recognised nine creative sectors:

- advertising and marketing
- architecture
- crafts
- design: product, graphic, and fashion design
- film, TV productions, TV, video, radio, and photography
- IT, software, and computer services
- publishing
- museums, galleries, and libraries
- music, performing, and visual arts. (DCMS, 2015)

When we look at its classification of creative occupations that make up the creative industries, it is evident that this is the (unacknowledged) source of the Irish Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media’s inclusive definition of the field in Culture 2025. The wide compass of Culture 2025 (wider, that is, than Innovation 2020) is welcome, but what we really need are the statistics to go with it.

Nesta, meanwhile – originally established with funding from the UK lottery and now operating as a registered charity – has established a Creative

Industries Policy and Evidence Centre. This is significant not least because it is a consortium of nine UK universities, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its Creative Industries Clusters Programme. Thus it has a strong academic and research foundation. Among its contributions is a recent submission to the UK spending review in September 2021 (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, 2021).

One may question some of the effects of UK policymaking and its tendency to foster metrics-based decision-making and notions of innovation that can result in pre-packaged productions and formulaic approaches. Nonetheless, this body of work provides some foundation for taking creativity seriously and recognising its economic contribution. When funding is tight, as it always is, such analysis may turn out to matter.

“Nesta – originally established with funding from the UK lottery and now operating as a registered charity – has established a Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

If we were to look for insight in Ireland, where might we turn? ‘Assessment of the Economic Impact of the Arts in Ireland’, an extensive report by Indecon for the Arts Council in 2009 (updated in 2011) provided some orientation on these questions, geared partly around areas supported by the Arts Council specifically but investigating the wider arts sector and beyond. The analysis in 2009 concluded that GVA amounted to €782m, a modest 0.5% of total national GVA. For the creative industries (defined along the lines of the wider view taken in the UK), it concluded that GVA was close to €5.5bn, representing 3.5% of the national figure for the year (Indecon, 2009).²

In 2010, Declan Curran and Chris van Egeraat drew on this report, among other sources, for their working paper ‘Defining and Valuing Dublin’s Creative Industries’. They offered nuanced definitions, suggesting a focus on creative occupations as a complement to industrial classifications in measuring economic activity and contribution (Curran and van Egeraat, 2010).

Outlook

All of this was more than a decade ago, raising the question of why our research base is so limited in this area. One exception is the 2017 ‘Economic Analysis of the Audiovisual Sector in the Republic of Ireland’. Although its focus is targeted, the report determined that the sector generated €1.05bn in GVA in 2016 and direct employment of 10,560 (Olsberg SPI with Nordicity, 2017; see also Indecon, 2021).

The other significant exception is the Western Region, which has been the subject of a number of reports and projects. In a recent report for the Western Development Commission, Patrick Collins adopts a definition of the creative industries that encompasses three overlapping sectors – craft, cultural, and creative – and concludes that the area as a whole constitutes up to ‘12% of all enterprises in the West of Ireland’ (Collins, 2021, p. 7). Notably, a major source of the data came from a special request to the Central Statistics Office rather than information standardly available from government departments. The challenges in gaining an inclusive clear picture and tracking developments over time are therefore considerable.

If we had more settled definitions and statistics on economic contribution, we could begin to map the provision of teaching programmes onto the cultural and creative industries. Many courses exist producing graduates with key skills. There are arts management courses at several universities: NUI Galway has an MA in Literature and Publishing; Maynooth University has an MSc in Design Innovation; and the Creative Futures Academy (a consortium of the National College of Art and Design; Institute of Art, Design and Technology; and University College Dublin, funded under the Human Capital Initiative) has been established to bridge the gap

between higher education institutes and industry. Creative digital media can be studied at undergraduate level at Technological University Dublin and NUI Galway. These are but a few; many more instances and opportunities could be mentioned.

“If we had more settled definitions and statistics on economic contribution, we could begin to map the provision of teaching programmes onto the cultural and creative industries.

These rivers of policy and debate run deeper than this initial overview can describe. As shown by ongoing work from NUI Galway in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Value in Leeds, approaches to measurement and monitoring reveal much about the sensibility behind Irish policymaking – alongside the embedding of ideas of creativity in national identity, soft power, and cultural diplomacy, where this article began.

We are yet to truly begin the process of reckoning which takes off when the accumulation of data ends. Questions of meritocracy (O’Brien et al., 2016), class, race, gender, and inequality in the cultural and creative industries remain to be addressed in an Irish context.

To close with desiderata:

- We need proper research on the scope and contribution of the creative and cultural industries in Ireland, delegated to a specific government department reporting on an annual basis.
- Given our historic associations with creativity, we should develop a Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre of our own. Funders like the Irish Research Council are well placed to support such an initiative.
- The successor to Innovation 2020 should recognise the importance of the creative and cultural industries, incorporating the humanities in its vision of national research priorities.

NOTES

1. The same conclusion was drawn at European level by KEA (2015, p. 6): ‘The scrutiny of Eurostat sources shows that the European Union still has an incomplete and narrow picture of its creative capacity and the contribution of its cultural and creative sectors to its economic and social achievement. As a result, citizens and their political representatives often take the view that investment in culture is not a priority and have difficulties in linking culture and innovation.’
2. For these figures, see Indecon (2009), pp. xiv, xvii, 28, 36. For definition of the creative industries, see pp. xvi–xvii.

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A Turning Point for Open Research?

The value of open research in the Covid-19 era and beyond



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Covid-19 has heightened the urgency for greater scientific cooperation and open dissemination of research. This article reflects on drivers and challenges associated with the open research agenda and calls for strategic and collective action to realise a more effective, equitable, and open research system.

Covid-19 and the value of open research

Research for the public good and the value of sharing publications and data as openly as possible have been brought to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such times of crisis serve as reminders of why the movement towards open science, or open research as it is also known, advocates for greater transparency, knowledge equity, and openness through practices such as open access to publications, responsible management and sharing of research data, citizen science, and alternative methods for research evaluation.¹ Instead of being locked behind paywalls, research made freely and publicly accessible contributes to an open and informed society and broadens access to and participation in the research process.

Recognising the urgency to share openly, commercial publishers were quick to lift paywalls on coronavirus research at the beginning of the pandemic, but only for a limited period of time.² Rapid sharing via preprint servers also surged, and other mechanisms were rapidly developed, such as the Open COVID Pledge and guidelines and platforms for data sharing.³

Among calls from prominent organisations was a Joint Appeal for Open Science from the Directors-General of UNESCO and WHO and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, seeking to 'reaffirm the fundamental right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications and advocate for open, inclusive and collaborative science'.⁴ The joint appeal recognises the potential for open science to reduce inequalities and calls for collective action with a view to 'creating a global knowledge commons and closing existing gaps in science, technology and innovation'.

An international policy agenda

The urgency of recent calls to make research open by default builds on decades-long debates

about models of academic publishing,⁵ milestones in the open access movement from the 1990s onwards, and more recent developments such as the FAIR principles formalised in 2016 (to make data Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable).

In Europe, open science is a policy priority of the European Commission, and successive framework programmes have strengthened the requirements for open access and FAIR data.⁶ In Horizon Europe (2021–2027), a range of open science practices are mandated or recommended, and open science is considered in the evaluation of proposals under ‘excellence’ and ‘quality and efficiency of implementation’. In parallel, the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) is being developed to provide a ‘web of FAIR data and services’ by federating infrastructures across member states and research communities.⁷

Outside of Europe, an international consortium has implemented Plan S to accelerate open access to publications through funder mandates,⁸ and federal agencies such as NASA have programmes to increase the understanding and adoption of open science.⁹ A further significant development is the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science, which aims to be a global, standard-setting instrument that defines shared values for open science and identifies concrete actions for member states.¹⁰ It emphasises specific core values of open science, including quality and integrity, collective benefit, equity and fairness, and diversity and inclusiveness.

Towards a national action plan for open research

In line with developments in Europe and beyond, Ireland has outlined its ambitions for open research in the National Framework on the Transition to an Open Research Environment.¹¹ Developed by Ireland’s National Open Research Forum (NORF),¹² the framework sets out objectives across five key areas: open access to research publications, enabling FAIR research data, infrastructures for access to and preservation of research, skills and competencies, and incentives and rewards.

As National Open Research Coordinator, I have been working with NORF to develop a National Action Plan for open research, which will identify the required support structures to help researchers and the research system navigate the transition towards open research. Through its working groups and coordination bodies, NORF has benefitted from the substantial volunteer efforts of a broad group of stakeholders and experts to analyse the landscape of open research support structures in Ireland, consult with national and international peers, and develop recommendations for concrete actions.

Analysis of progress nationally and internationally underlines that while the opportunities and policy direction are clearer than ever before, significant challenges remain to embed open research as mainstream practice. Awareness, implementation, and uptake have been uneven to date, with disparities between disciplines, institutions, career stages, and regions.

“ It is incumbent on us all to imagine and foster practices that do not replicate or deepen inequities or imbalances in the current system.

“ In Europe, open science is a policy priority of the European Commission.

Why is this the case? Factors include a fragmented environment of financial resources, specialist support staff, open research infrastructure, guidance, and training; a lack of clear monitoring and governance mechanisms; and research assessment and evaluation that are often misaligned with open research aims and values.¹³ On the last point, a 2019 report by the European University Association showed that research publications and attracting external research funding are ranked by researchers as the most important activities for their careers, whereas open science and open access rank as the least important overall.¹⁴

From NORF feedback and public consultation, it is clear that there is a range of perspectives on open research, including a justified concern with how to develop inclusive and equitable routes for open access. Indeed, it is incumbent on us all to imagine and foster practices that do not replicate or deepen inequities or imbalances in the current system. Further, we should use this opportunity to build on and adapt proven examples of best practice, respond to the needs of the local environment and disciplinary communities, including those of the arts and humanities, and support the principles of bibliodiversity and multilingualism in scholarly communication within and beyond our borders.

To address these challenges, it is imperative that Ireland take a system-level approach to open research, acknowledging it as a cross-cutting, strategic national priority for the research and innovation sector. The open research agenda requires systemic change and can only be progressed through thinking and acting collectively. The broad scope of the agenda should be met by requisite long-term investment and be embedded in national plans and strategies, including the next national strategy for research and innovation.

Enacting culture change

To conclude, it is worth reflecting on the crux of the transition to open research, namely the need to foster and enact a change in research culture and behaviour. A useful framework proposed by Brian Nosek from the Center for Open Science lays out five levels of intervention: making change possible through infrastructure, making it easy through the user experience, making it normative through communities, making it rewarding through incentives, and making it required through policies.¹⁵ With this in mind, let us pause to consider our personal, institutional, and disciplinary contexts: Where are interventions needed, and what is my potential role and responsibility?

I would also call for engagement about open research on the basis of what Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes as ‘generous thinking’: ‘a mode of engagement that emphasises listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition’.¹⁶ Taking such an approach foregrounds principles of care, consensus-building, and sensitivity to the opportunities to work together to find shared solutions to shared challenges.

Will we look back on this year and the spotlight on research communication during Covid-19 as a turning point for open research? Perhaps, but only if

we harness the momentum and will of the community to make strategic choices about a more effective, equitable, and open research system.

ENDNOTES

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Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Fostering Ireland's Future Talent

A crucial component
of a rich and diverse
research system



Dr Yvonne Halpin
MSCA National Delegate
and Head of the Irish
Marie Skłodowska-Curie
Office

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCAs) provide a vital source of funding for bottom-up research through innovative training projects anchored on international mobility. Ireland has been extremely successful in the MSCAs throughout Horizon 2020. The advent of Horizon Europe presents an opportunity for Ireland to aim even higher in this programme by supporting research actors, across all disciplines and sectors, and enabling more talent to follow in the footsteps of Madame Curie.

Introduction

Marie Skłodowska-Curie was a highly ambitious, passionate, and inspirational scientist, famous for her discoveries of polonium and radium and winner of two Nobel Prizes. In fact, she was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize and was the first person, and only woman, to win the prize in two different fields. Through her determination in overcoming barriers and her curiosity about the unknown, she demonstrated values that have become some of the central tenets of the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), a programme which has enabled over 1,400 young researchers in Ireland to follow in her pioneering footsteps.

With a focus on curiosity-driven, bottom-up, excellent research, the MSCAs fund innovative research training projects involving career development and knowledge-exchange opportunities through international, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary mobility of researchers, to better prepare them to address current and future societal challenges. The research and innovation activities, and importantly the highly skilled human capital supported by the MSCAs, contribute greatly to a vibrant, broad-based research base in Ireland and across Europe, boosting jobs, growth, and investment.

Since the advent of the 'Marie Curie brand' in the EU's Fourth Framework Programme for research and technological development in the mid-1990s, the programme has set the benchmark for attracting top talent and promoting excellent working conditions for researchers. Over the years, the MSCA awards have become highly prestigious, widely known among the global research community for the calibre of the graduates and fellows who benefit from the MSCAs' strong emphasis on training and development.

Indeed, the proof is in the Nobel pudding, with no fewer than 12 beneficiaries of MSCA funding going on to win Nobel Prizes. The MSCA prestige even extends as far as the Academy Awards: Professor Anil Kokaram of Trinity College Dublin shared an Oscar with London-based company The Foundry for their work on visual effects software, which received prior MSCA funding, used in films such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Research culture

For a researcher, being part of an MSCA award brings many benefits, such as exposure to international networks, structured and in-depth collaboration across sectors and disciplines, international secondments, and increased visibility of their research. Combining this with world-class training and career development opportunities results in graduates and researchers who are highly employable across all sectors.

The bottom-up nature of the MSCAs, a key selling point of the Actions, means that researchers have the opportunity to freely choose their topic from across all disciplines. This presents a fantastic opportunity for academic researchers to shape their research vision and for those in non-academic sectors to respond to short-, medium-, and long-term innovation needs.

This has been key to supporting a diverse and exciting research culture in Ireland. Across sectors and disciplines, researchers are pushing the frontiers of new knowledge and contributing to solutions to important societal challenges. These include exploring how social class is taught and learned in private rock-music education, studying antibiotic-resistant bacteria in the global fight against antimicrobial resistance, investigating the link between early education and poverty, developing new materials to improve the safety of high-voltage systems in electric vehicles, and creating new ways to enable students with intellectual disabilities to become active in research.

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCAs) provide a vital source of funding for bottomup research through innovative training projects anchored on international mobility.

In breaking down cross-sectoral boundaries, the research funded by the MSCAs is creating a better society for Ireland by ensuring appropriate and timely use of the research findings. MSCA researchers have been embedded across sectors, collaborating with actors such as government departments on social policy on employment to widen participation in the labour market, with civil society organisations to develop innovative solutions to reduce the adverse social consequences of trauma-related psychological distress, and with companies in sectors that are key to a prosperous economy in Ireland, such as ICT, pharmaceuticals, and the meat and dairy industries.

Ireland has been very successful in the MSCAs, receiving over €196 million since 2014, making the MSCAs the area of highest drawdown nationally in Horizon 2020. To put this in context, over €1.18 billion has been awarded to researchers in Ireland across all sectors and disciplines across the entire suite of funding programmes under the H2020 umbrella. Ireland's excellent performance is further evidenced by the fact that its average national success rates in the MSCAs most often exceed the European average.

Thriving through collaboration

The higher education sector accounts for over 80% of Ireland's drawdown from the MSCAs, most of which has been awarded to our universities. The remaining 20% has been awarded to companies, civil society organisations, and other public bodies. With the launch of Horizon Europe, we are entering an exciting new phase for the MSCAs. The office will work with actors across the system to strengthen engagement, in particular with the technological universities, institutes of technology, private enterprise, and civil society organisations, with the ultimate goal of increasing participation across the various MSCA programmes to build on Ireland's success levels across all sectors.

The MSCAs are considered a national asset and a vital funding source for enabling a diverse and thriving research and innovation community in Ireland.

The MSCAs are considered a national asset and a vital funding source for enabling a diverse and thriving research and innovation community in Ireland. The Irish Marie Skłodowska-Curie Office (IMSCO), based at the Irish Universities Association, has as its overall objective to maximise Ireland's success in the programme. We do this by providing a 'conception to completion' service offering support and guidance to MSCA applicants and awardees from across the research system, including higher education institutions, research organisations, private enterprise, civil society organisations, public bodies, and beyond.

The Irish Research Council's (IRC) funding of the IMSCO is critical in sustaining and enhancing engagement in the MSCAs, which ultimately contributes towards Ireland's strategic aims of building a research and innovation talent pipeline, supporting researchers' career development, ensuring cutting-edge research activity, and stimulating and enhancing research and innovation activity across the public and private sectors. The IRC's continued commitment to resourcing the IMSCO means that more people and organisations, across all disciplines and sectors, will benefit from targeted support.

Given the highly competitive nature of the MSCAs, the research and innovation community in Ireland can be proud of its success and past achievements. But this is not a time to rest on our laurels. Achieving our vision of being Europe's top performer in the MSCAs in terms of drawdown per capita will require an *all-of-system* approach.

We will strive to achieve this by collaborating with universities to identify further target areas and disciplines and by working with the technological universities and institutes of technology to build capacity and develop skills necessary for supporting MSCA applicants. Furthermore, by actively engaging with representative bodies in the non-academic sector, we will promote the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions as an attractive mechanism to address talent shortages and support the research and innovation activities needed for Ireland's economy and society to prosper.

Postgraduate research (PGR) students are a vital group in national research and innovation in Ireland. Every two years, PGR StudentSurvey.ie invites responses from master's-by-research and PhD students about their experiences of higher education in Ireland, including their academic, personal, and social development. This article summarises the latest survey results and provides a brief analysis of the findings.

Purpose

Every two years, PGR StudentSurvey.ie (Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn do Mhic Léinn Taighde Iarchéime) invites responses from master's-by-research and PhD students about their experiences of higher education in Ireland, including their academic, personal, and social development. In 2021, 3,541 students in 21 higher education institutions (HEIs) participated.

There is also a second survey, StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn), designed for first- and final-year undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021b).

It is essential for Ireland's national research system that those who carry out research here, from the very beginnings of their career, receive an educational experience that equips them with the capability and confidence to conduct their research to the highest possible standards. Underpinning the quality of postgraduate research degree provision is Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education. A complementary Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes, launched by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), is organised around the key principles in the National Framework for Doctoral Education.

The information gathered in PGR StudentSurvey.ie will greatly advance the objectives of these policies, by providing key evidence for both HEIs themselves and the broader higher education and research and innovation system to enhance the quality of postgraduate research degree provision in Ireland.

Early evidence from organisations such as QQI (2020), USI (2020), and AHEAD (2020) suggests that the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of students in higher education has been significant

Selected Results from the PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2021

The impact of Covid-19 on postgraduate research students



Dr Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha
Project Manager of StudentSurvey.ie

and far-reaching. This and institutional evidence led the StudentSurvey.ie steering group to add specific Covid-19-related questions to the 2021 survey.

Results

Results of questions specifically on the impact of Covid-19

In their responses, postgraduate research students felt supported by ongoing effective and timely communication (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a). Around a third said Covid-19 affected their funding or their ability to fund themselves during their research. Around two thirds reported adequate access to the on-campus facilities they required to engage with their research.

Fewer respondents to PGR StudentSurvey.ie than StudentSurvey.ie said they had a suitable study environment at home, though slightly more said they felt connected with their HEI. See Table 1 for details.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact Covid-19 has had on your experience?		All Students	Master's by Research	PhD
My higher education institution provides me with ongoing effective and timely communication.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	16.8%	17.0%	15.5%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	83.3%	83.0%	84.5%
Covid-19 has affected my funding or my ability to fund myself during my research.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	64.4%	64.1%	65.7%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	35.6%	35.8%	34.3%
I have adequate access to the on-campus facilities required to engage with my research.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	40.8%	41.5%	37.1%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	59.2%	58.5%	62.9%
I have a suitable study environment at home (space to work, internet access, computer, etc.).	Somewhat/definitely disagree	33.1%	33.5%	30.3%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	67.0%	66.5%	69.7%
I feel connected to my higher education institution despite the restricted access to campus.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	42.2%	42.9%	38.1%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	57.8%	57.1%	61.8%

Table 1: PGR StudentSurvey.ie responses nationally

When asked 'How has Covid-19 most impacted on your research?', a theme emerged of disrupted access to necessary facilities, including labs, library, specialist materials, workspace, and data collection. Impact on time was also frequently cited: there were delays to research plans, everything took longer, and there was less time for research. One other noteworthy theme is the impact on their environment, particularly the loss of their collegiate environment. All themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2.

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Disruption in access to:	1,404	Labs	439
		Library/archives	218
		Campus workspace/facilities	167
		Specialist materials/equipment	91
		Data collection/fieldwork	489
Environment	822	Collegiate environment (inc. colleagues, collaborators)	459
		Contact with supervisor/academic staff/support staff	161
		Working from home (WFH) environment unsuitable	202
Time	706	Delays/slowed pace	567
		Other commitments drawing on time	139
Personal impact	406	Negative impact on productivity	86
		Negative impact on motivation	131
		Negative impact on mental health (inc. stress and isolation)	189
Other	243	Financial impact	91
		Travel	68
		Positive impact	47
		Other	37
Generally	112	Non-specific impact/overall major revisions	
Not impacted	173		

Table 2: PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 1 nationally

Note: Some comments received more than one code.

Financial impacts were not often cited as Covid-19's most significant impacts on PGR students. But when asked 'In what way(s) could your higher education institution improve its support for you during the current circumstances?', financial support was often highlighted as the possible solution. Calls for extensions of time and funding often intersected.

Given the emphasis on disrupted access to necessary facilities in the previous question, it is unsurprising that the solution for these students is greater access to those facilities. PGR students sought more communication, or different messages in the communication they did receive, greater recognition of the exceptional circumstances in which students found themselves, and proportionate compassion from their HEI. All themes and subthemes are presented in Table 3.

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Increase access to	648	Labs	111
		Library/archives	125
		Campus workspace/facilities	281
		Specialist materials/equipment	25
		Online facilities/software	106
Other supports	495	Connection/networking opportunities	229
		Support for mental health	60
		Support for specific cohorts, e.g. student parents, international students	51
		Other	155
Engagement	426	More communicative (timing and quantity of communications)	244
		Change communications strategy	47
		Response to Covid-19 (inc. vaccination/testing)	62
		Recognition of circumstances and making allowances	73
Finance	355	Reduce/remove costs (inc. waive fees)	79
		More funding/funding opportunities (inc. paying for teaching)	145
		Extension/reallocation of existing funding	131
Research supports	473	Deadline extensions	190
		More/improved supervision	56
		Support for research challenges during pandemic	69
		Supports to WFH (equipment/IT support/costs)	158
Nothing	565	Nothing institution can do to resolve issues	158
		Institution has done all they can	407
Other	54		

Table 3: PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 2 nationally

Looking deeper: The impact of Covid-19 on PGR students

The responses from the Covid-19 questions point to significant differences between the Arts, Humanities, and Social Science (AHSS) and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) groups in relation to funding, on-campus facilities, and a suitable study environment at home. In 2021, 63.9% of STEM respondents said they had adequate access to the on-campus facilities required to engage with their research, while only 50.5% of AHSS respondents did.

This correlates with the results for *Research Infrastructure and Facilities*, where STEM respondents again said they had better access to resources and facilities to help them carry out their research (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021c). The pandemic has disrupted all PGR students' capacity to carry out their research, but it may be that STEM students, despite limited access to laboratories and so on, are in a better position to progress their research than AHSS students, who have faced longer library and archive closures, disruptions in access to human participants, and restrictions on fieldwork.

When the source of funding for AHSS and STEM students was examined, 33.8% of AHSS students said they were self-funded, compared to 7.7% of STEM students. Financial factors may bear more heavily on the self-funded AHSS students, causing them to assess their position as regards continuing their studies. This speculation is supported by the finding that 17.3% of AHSS students have considered withdrawing, compared to 12.7% of STEM students. Finally, the results indicate that STEM students have been able to avail of development opportunities during the pandemic more readily than AHSS students, which may mean they are better prepared for their careers after their studies.

The survey results support suggestions from national and international research that female postgraduate research students have been more affected than male PGR students by the pandemic. For instance, 52% of male respondents to PGR StudentSurvey.ie said they have submitted a paper for publication in an academic journal or book, while the figure for female respondents was 46.7%.

Responses to the question on *Overall Experience – Withdrawal* point to significant differences between male and female respondents: 17.5% of female respondents considered withdrawing for personal or family reasons, compared to 13.8% of male respondents. This points to a possible gendered aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which could affect the career progression of female PGR students.

This limited preliminary analysis should be interpreted with caution. Future analysis of PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2023 data will allow for more confident comparison of pre-Covid-19 data, data gathered during the pandemic from the 2021 survey, and the post-Covid-19 data anticipated in 2023.

Final remarks

Postgraduate research students are a vital group in national research and innovation in Ireland. In 2018, there were 8,626 permanent academic staff and 2,294 postdoctoral staff (Government of Ireland, 2018). They are outnumbered by the more than 10,000 doctoral and research-master's students in Irish higher education institutions. PGR students are a key cohort currently undertaking valuable research and who will lead on projects in the future.

Significant differences by gender were not evident in the results of PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019, but suggestions of them appear in the 2021 survey results. Steps must be taken to ensure that such differences are not allowed to emerge as these current early-career researchers progress.

In 2019 and 2021, about 68% of PGR students chose an academic career in higher education as a career aspiration priority, while about 58% chose a research career outside higher education. There is more to be done to equip PGR students with the skills and expectations to work in more settings than academic careers in higher education. Also, in 2021 only 46% said they were satisfied with their work-life balance, down from nearly 56% in 2019. This raises the question of whether the expected workload, working hours, and precarity of researchers should be perpetuated.

The adequacy of the workspace and facilities is understood in practical terms for some, such as the value of having a quiet room to write in. But it also means having the space to learn how to collaborate, to create networks with other early-career researchers, or to develop in the company of more senior researchers. In 2021, 68% said their department provides access to a relevant seminar programme, while 47% said they have frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students. The risks of isolation and loneliness increase when PGR students feel they have no network to participate in.

Providers of postgraduate research training should seek to support and empower these early-career researchers, without whom research and innovation in Ireland would be significantly diminished.

Acknowledgements

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Irish Research Council funding boosts next generation of researchers in Ireland



Award winner Cian Fogarty, Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar 2021, Trinity College Dublin. Cian's research will explore improved solar thermal technology for decarbonising residential heating.

"The Ireland Postgraduate Scholar awards are extremely competitive," said Peter Brown, Director of the Irish Research Council.

"They attract applications from researchers all over the world..."

"The scope of awards across and between disciplines supports the balanced development of our research system and ensures that we are best positioned for the challenges of an uncertain future."



Brakemi Egbedi, Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar 2021, Waterford Institute of Technology.



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University



Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth



QQI

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Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



SOLAS

An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scléanna
Further Education and Training Authority



Trinity College Dublin
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The University of Dublin