

# 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



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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.

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### 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.

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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 NPHE'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.