



Ireland's Education **2022** Yearbook

*Information, Commentary, and Insights on Education
in Ireland in 2022*

- INTRODUCTION
- EARLY CHILDHOOD
- PRIMARY
- SECOND LEVEL
- FURTHER EDUCATION & TRAINING
- HIGHER EDUCATION
- RESEARCH

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Introduction



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

Our (mis)management of Ireland's education system over the past century

Senior Cycle reform

The Citizens' Assembly for Education, a once-in-a-generation opportunity

Learning to work in the 21st century

The vital importance of retaining and fostering a European consciousness





Editorial

The mission of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* is to accurately and fully cover the story of education in Ireland in the given year. The articles in this year's edition, written by leading lights in their sectors, fulfil this purpose for 2022. Since this is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the independent Irish State, it seems important and timely this year that we also reflect on how we have managed Ireland's education system over the past century.



Dr Brian Mooney
Editor of Ireland's
Education Yearbook

100 years ago

The Irish Free State formally came into existence one hundred years ago on 6 December 1922, one year after the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed by the British government and the plenipotentiaries acting on behalf of Dáil Éireann. The subsequent Dáil debate was very contentious, and many have speculated that if a vote had been taken before Christmas that year, the treaty would have been rejected by the Dáil. But following the debate the vote was put off until 7 January 1922.

Otto von Bismarck is credited with the line that 'wars are not won by generals, but by school teachers and parish priests who help shape a country's sense of its own history'. It was to those teachers and clerics that the TDs contemplating their decision on the fate of the treaty returned to spend Christmas and the New Year in 1921/22.

What were people telling their elected representatives over that festive season?

Exhausted after the bitter War of Independence, many, including the clergy and primary school teachers, urged their local TD to vote to accept the treaty on offer. When the TDs gathered in their temporary location in the Council Chamber of University College Dublin (UCD) in Earlsfort Terrace (now the National Concert Hall), on Saturday 7 January, they voted 64 to 57 to accept the agreement as presented.

When the Dáil reconvened the following Tuesday, Eamon De Valera lost a motion to be re-elected as Dáil president by two votes, after which he and his supporters walked out. Arthur Griffith was then elected as Dáil president. The following day he wrote to Michael Hayes TD, a lecturer in French in UCD, inviting him to become Ireland's first Minister for Education. Thus began Ireland's self-management of its own education system.



What effect has self-government had on our education system over the past century?

At independence, no changes were made to the administrative system of national education. Curricular reform was introduced in 1922, based on the recommendations of the First National Programme Conference. In 1925, the government set up a committee under the chairmanship of Rev. J. McKenna SJ to review the curriculum, and the report of this committee (known as the Second National Programme Conference) was published in 1926.

To contextualise the Irish education system inherited by the Dáil and Michael Hayes in 1922, it is useful to read the following brief history attached to the *Constitutional Review Group Report* in 1995 written by Áine Hyland:

When the national school system was set up in 1831, its main object 'was to unite in one system children of different creeds'. The National Board was 'to look with peculiar favour' on applicants for aid for schools jointly managed by Roman Catholics and Protestants. While some of the schools which were taken into connection with the Board in the early years were jointly managed, the main Christian churches put pressure on the government to allow aid to be given to schools under the management of individual churches. This pressure was so effective that by the mid nineteenth century, only 4% of national schools were under mixed management.

In terms of the curriculum, the main principle of 19th and early 20th century primary education in Ireland was that schools should offer 'combined moral and literary instruction and separate religious instruction'. While the National Board set down the curriculum for moral and literary instruction, the Patron of each school determined the form and content of religious instruction in the schools under his patronage.

In the Ireland of the 19th century, Lord Stanley's call for Ireland to establish a school system run by the State to unite in one system children of different creeds was no match for the power of a Catholic Church determined to build a denominational system under its total control.

To suggest in 1922 that a newly established Irish State struggling to survive after a bitter Civil War, and to build a viable democracy out of the ashes of the conflict which had torn the country apart, was going to challenge the Catholic Church's total control of our education system would have been fanciful in the extreme.

That new government allowed the denominational system they themselves had grown up in to carry on exactly as it was then structured the day they took office. The only role they took on after they took up the administration of our education system was related to curriculum development and the payment of salaries.

“ To suggest in 1922 that a newly established Irish State was going to challenge the Catholic Church's total control of our education system would have been fanciful in the extreme.

A process of self-reflection

Reflecting in 2022 on how we managed our education system over the first century of our existence as an independent Irish State, I am not seeking to pass any value judgement on the vast majority of those religious and lay teachers who worked tirelessly to educate the children in their care. This is very much an exercise of self-reflection.

I was educated and worked my entire life in the Catholic denominational education system. My maternal grandfather, Daniel Mc Sweeney, graduated from the De La Salle teacher training college in Newtown in Waterford in 1912. He taught from 1913 until his death in 1951 in Ballyseedy National School in Tralee. His two eldest sons, Daniel and Sean, entered the priesthood in Kerry and were integral to the operation of Catholic education in their diocese all their lives.

“ It is only in the past 20 years that we have had the courage to drag into the light of day the horrendous consequences of unquestioning acceptance of the system of education managed primarily but not exclusively by the organs of the Catholic Church.

Daniel's eldest daughter, Maureen, my mother's twin, entered the Mercy Order in Dublin following graduation from Carysfort College and taught in their schools all her working life. His youngest daughter, Bridie, who sadly passed away this September, followed the same path into Coláiste Íde in Dingle, through Carysfort College, and on to Scoil Eoin Balloonagh in Tralee, where she taught until her retirement in the late 1980s.

The baton has now passed to the next generation of the family, a number of whom are today teaching in our Catholic schools and colleges. Not a day has passed since the Irish State was founded in 1922 when a member of my grandfather's family, including myself for 43 of those hundred years, was not a teacher in the Irish Catholic education system.

Una voce

It is only in the past 20 years, following the groundbreaking work of the late Mary Rafferty and Betty Purcell, that we have had the courage to drag into the light of day the horrendous consequences of unquestioning acceptance of the system of education managed primarily but not exclusively by the organs of the Catholic Church.

Having myself spent six years (2006–12) as a member of the Education Finance Board (EFB), at the behest of the Oireachtas, seeking to provide remedial educational opportunities to those adults and their extended families who spent their formative years in Ireland's residential care institutions, I am only too aware of the horrors that some religious and lay staff inflicted on the most vulnerable children in schools and care institutions.

I cannot speak highly enough of my fellow members of the EFB who were residents of such institutions and suffered unspeakable abuse at the hands

of people charged with their care, and who worked tirelessly on behalf of their fellow survivors.

Again in 2022 we are reminded of this reality, through the courage and bravery of two brothers who were robbed of their innocence within the grounds and premises of Blackrock College, who told their story in an RTE Documentary on One programme in November 2022.

As then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny stated on all our behalf in response to the report on the Catholic diocese of Cloyne in Dáil Éireann, never again can we allow any institution, no matter how prestigious, to be beyond the democratic oversight of the elected representatives of the people.

We have made huge strides in developing Ireland's education system over the first hundred years of our existence, as described in Ireland's Education Yearbook over the years, but we have allowed religious organisations to operate outside democratic oversight, and this has resulted in great harm and suffering to our children. No matter the financial costs, we can never again allow any institution or persons to be beyond question.

NCCA curriculum review framework

As a society we have been tiptoeing around the issue of the time spent in denominational religious instruction in our schools for years now. Many teachers in our schools are not practising members of any faith community and yet spend time teaching denominational doctrine daily as part of their contractual duties.

In his overview article of early childhood education in the current Yearbook, Mathias Urban describes education as 'the purposeful interaction between adult and child, where learning unfolds in a relationship'. How healthy can it be for the relationship between some of our teachers and their students to be based on a lie, where the teacher daily has to hide their own lack of religious faith from their students?

The Catholic Church might also ask itself how beneficial it is to the faith development of its parishes to have the key sacramental moments in members' lives shaped outside of the parish structures. They might find that parish-based catechesis is a far healthier model of faith formation.

It is only now, in late December 2022, that proposals are being considered by the current Minister for Education, Norma Foley, to address that conundrum that would see primary schools spending more time teaching foreign languages and wellbeing, and less time teaching religion, under planned changes to the curriculum to be introduced under a new framework for what primary school children learn in school.

“ We have allowed religious organisations to operate outside democratic oversight, and this has resulted in great harm and suffering to our children. ”

“ A report by the NCCA has recommended that religion would be part of a new curriculum that would include ethical and multi-belief education. ”

A report on the curriculum by the State's advisory body the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has recommended that the time spent teaching religion should be cut from two and a half hours a week to two hours, and that religion would be part of a new curriculum that would include ethical and multi-belief education, in order to give young students a wider perspective on beliefs. A previous change to the teaching of religion, proposed by the NCCA in 2016, was met with resistance from the Catholic Church.

Other newly proposed changes in the curriculum, reported by my colleague Carl O'Brien in the *Irish Times*, include foreign languages being taught for an hour a week from Third Class onwards; more flexibility to allow schools to focus on priority areas of learning decided by individual schools; greater focus on wellbeing, with three hours a week dedicated to topics such as belonging and resilience; and more emphasis on art, with at least two hours a week on music, drama, dance, film, and digital media.

This proposed framework will allow schools to keep their focus on religious or denominational patrons' programmes, but for a shorter period of the school day. The new plan involved extensive consultation overseen by the NCCA. It will steer the development of a new curriculum that will shape the teaching of young children into the second century of the Irish State's existence.

Key lesson from the pandemic

If there is one lesson we can take from the pandemic, it is the importance of the relationship between teacher and learner. Mathias Urban refers to it in his overview of early childhood education as he calls again for a publicly funded, child-centred service.

Teresa O'Doherty, in her overview article on primary education, writes that 'relationships are at the heart of education and that learning in community, learning with and from interactions, and engaging socially, are pivotal to the educational experience'. Paul Crone, reviewing second level, states similarly that 'teaching is relational and the importance of the relationship between the student and the teacher is key to learning'.

At further and higher education levels we have seen a huge increase in 2022 in the demands on mental health services, from students who found the remote online learning regime incredibly difficult mentally. A high-quality education can take place only within a trusting, honest, and open relationship between learner and teacher. How we implement this truth in our increasingly digitised world is the challenge for 2023 and beyond.

Foreword



Norma Foley TD
Minister for Education

Quality and inclusiveness

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote that the ‘the windows of a classroom always open / to the future’. This is a line which has always resonated with me, especially so in the months since my appointment as Minister for Education. There is no doubt but that our children and young people, through their experience of education, form some of their first and most long-lasting relationships, develop as thinkers and doers, and spend so much of their young lives.

Thankfully, education in Ireland is both hugely valued and high-quality in nature. As a society, community, and government we recognise the opportunity that education provides for our young people. As Minister for Education I have been entrusted with delivering the government’s commitments on education. I am extremely proud to have that role, but I am only too keenly aware of the responsibility it brings with it.

As a teacher, I am conscious of how important it is for a child or young person to access education in its fullest sense. Access to education can often be the determining factor in securing pathways to professional and other development opportunities, in promoting better life outcomes, and in ensuring fuller access to civic and community life. When something is as important as education, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that it is fully inclusive of, and accessible to, every learner, irrespective of their background, abilities, and needs. For this to be the case, to my mind, we need structural supports and initiatives to both embrace and empower our students.

Throughout my time as Minister for Education, I have held these values to the forefront of my mind. Close to my heart and also always on my mind are the many, many students it has been my pleasure to teach, the families with whom I have engaged, and the colleagues with whom I have worked. I have also leaned on the learnings each one of us in the education sector garnered throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular the ever-growing consciousness of the daily demands and pressures being placed on the young shoulders of our students.

New initiatives

As a consequence of these experiences and others, it became abundantly clear to me that the education sector needed to respond, to take decisive action, and to be brave. That is why, since its formation, this government has introduced the largest educational budgets in history and resourced and delivered a range of new and innovative initiatives and policies across both primary and post-primary education.

To name just one initiative, during the last academic year I secured the single largest ever expansion of the DEIS programme. Delivering

Equality of Opportunity in Schools is our flagship initiative to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage. It offers additional resources, including enhanced capitation payments, additional staff, bespoke leadership and development opportunities, and access to Home School Community Liaison and School Completion programmes. The DEIS programme has shown considerable success in improving Ireland’s second-level completion rates, which are now the highest in Europe, and in ensuring that students at risk of educational disadvantage are fully supported through the education system. As a consequence of a €180 million investment in the DEIS programme, one in four of our students now benefit from DEIS supports.

The primary pupil–teacher ratio has been successfully reduced by one point in each of the three budgets over which I have presided as Minister for Education, and now stands at a historic low of 23:1.

“ One of the most significant policy questions for me as Minister, and for the education sector as a whole, has been the reform of Ireland’s Senior Cycle.

Significant administrative support has also been introduced for principals, with a new minimum of one release day per week for all teaching principals and automatic administrative status for any primary principal whose school has two or more special classes. In every budget which this government has introduced, there has also been a significant increase in investment in special education, such that there are now 40,000 staff working across the

education sector who specifically support students with special educational needs.

Curricular reform

All of this investment and more has also facilitated significant policy developments across the full remit of the Department. One of the most significant policy questions for me as Minister and for the education sector as a whole has been the reform of Ireland’s Senior Cycle. This process had been considered for a number of years but took a very significant step forward in spring 2022 with the publication of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s (NCCA) Advisory Report on Senior Cycle and the Department of Education’s announcements of the next steps in Ireland’s reform process.

The NCCA produced its report after significant research and consultation. The report was based on extensive engagement by the NCCA with so many, including over 120 focus group events, 4,300 submissions through public consultation, and detailed engagement with 50 schools. The report, which represents a comprehensive body of work, provided an important basis for Senior Cycle reform. The NCCA will be very much to the fore as we progress that reform. The State Examinations Commission (SEC) will also be instrumental as we develop new assessment approaches in particular.

In education, our overarching goal in all that we do is to ensure that our students thrive while they are in school and indeed for the rest of their

lives, irrespective of what pathway they might choose to pursue. Certainly, the Leaving Certificate has stood us well since its establishment in the early days of the Irish Republic. It is trusted by students, parents, and broader society. It has allowed Ireland to develop a highly successful, high-skill economy. And yet it is clear that change is needed. One need only take the most cursory of glances to see just how much the world has changed in the last hundred years and indeed to observe the strong pace at which it continues to develop.

Smartphones and the ready availability of Google and broader international flows of people and data have had a significant impact on how we live, work, and socialise. To give just one illustration of this change, consider that the amount of data created and consumed over the last decade alone has increased by 5,000%. Any system that does not evolve, no matter how highly regarded it is, will be overtaken by countries whose system consistently evolves as they prepare students for the ever-changing modern world.

To truly succeed and thrive, our students must be supported to develop transversal skills, to work together in teams, to communicate effectively across a range of media, to easily identify meaningful information, and to demonstrate resilience. In our age of information, in addition to transmitting key knowledge, education must also teach students how to effectively deploy information.

As such, the three tenets of Senior Cycle reform are to:

- empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century
- enrich the student experience and build on what's strong in our current system
- embed wellbeing and reduce student stress levels.

To realise these ambitions, we are now progressing a wide array of actions, including:

- Every curriculum across Senior Cycle will be redeveloped, updating content and introducing school-based assessment worth 40% in each subject to ensure that students develop a wider range of skills and competences.
- New subjects will be introduced, providing greater choice for students to better reflect their range of interests and to support the development of a wider range of talents and skills. Two new subjects – Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development – will be ready for students in network schools starting Fifth Year in 2024.
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students have improved access to Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages from September 2022, broadening the options for LCA.
- A new qualification will be introduced at levels 1 and 2 on the National Framework of Qualifications to provide an appropriate level of assessment to some students with special educational needs, building on the equivalent programme at Junior Cycle level.

- A revised Transition Year programme will be established, and greater access to Transition Year for all students will be facilitated.

The programme of work we have set ourselves is ambitious – but it should be, it needs to be, because our young people and our society deserve such ambition. Those in the 1920s who introduced the Leaving Certificate had ambition; those who introduced free second-level education had ambition. Limitless ambition must also be the hallmark of Irish education in the 21st century.

As a teacher, I know that changing curricula and assessment is not easy. So I appreciate that students, teachers, schools, the NCCA, the SEC, and everyone involved will need time and space to find effective ways to innovate in our schools while still maintaining the quality of our students' educational experience.

Work is under way on the development of a new Primary Mathematics Curriculum.

It is for this reason I have announced that the subject redevelopment process at Senior Cycle will take place initially in network schools, so that schools and teachers can work with the NCCA and other experts to co-create new curricula and assessment modes. Their expertise and experience will be vital to the programme's success, and I am committed to ensuring that these schools and all other schools are adequately supported to make this key transition to a reformed Senior Cycle.

In addition to these advancements in Senior Cycle, we have furthered a number of initiatives, all designed to ensure that Irish students have the best possible education experience from early childhood right through to adulthood. The promotion of STEM learning in our education system is a key priority for the whole of government. My Department's STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026 sets out the ambitious goals and actions required to achieve and improve the STEM education experience and outcomes for all learners from early years to post-primary.

At primary level, it has been over 20 years since the publication of the Primary Curriculum. The NCCA is developing a new Primary Curriculum Framework, which builds on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while also responding to key challenges that have been identified. Work is also under way on the development of a new Primary Mathematics Curriculum, which aims to further the mathematical proficiency of all learners in our primary schools. I expect the Primary Curriculum Framework to be launched in early 2023, with the new Primary Mathematics Curriculum launching towards the middle of the year.

Following extensive consultation, the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 was published in April 2022. Its vision is to empower schools to harness the opportunities of digital transformation to build digital competence and an effective digital education ecosystem, so as to develop competent, critically engaged, active learners while supporting them to reach their potential and participate fully as global citizens in a digital world. Key to this strategy is

that all learners are given the opportunity to use digital technologies in their learning to reach their full potential, and that they are provided with the digital skills needed for an increasingly digital world.

Training and development

Significant changes in guidance counselling in schools are also under way. A national policy group has been established to develop a coherent long-term strategic framework for lifelong guidance. A new guidance unit has been established in my Department to oversee and coordinate guidance policy, while a guidance support team has been established in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Work is progressing to realise the recommendations set out in the Indecon review of career guidance tools and information, particularly in the area of inclusion, which will be further informed by the ongoing OECD review of Ireland's Skills Strategy.

I am mindful that the quality of our teaching profession is a critical factor in sustaining and enhancing the quality of education outcomes. Teacher education is a continuum, a journey from initial teacher education (ITE) through induction and continuous professional development (CPD). ITE is the first step on this journey and forms the bedrock of a career of lifelong learning. This initial phase of teacher learning plays a key role in determining the quality of learning outcomes for children and young people in our schools.

My Department is currently finalising an ITE policy statement which will present our vision for the ITE sector and how student teachers will be prepared to support all learners in the coming years. Under this new policy statement, we have set out our vision that every student teacher will complete at least one period of professional placement in a special education setting. We have also prioritised the development of a more diverse teaching profession, with clear and attractive pathways for students from all backgrounds.

Of course, this work and indeed all the work which has happened over the past number of years has been possible only because of the immense commitment, dedication, and talent of every person involved in the education sector – including, critically, all those who work in schools and directly with students, as well as those working in our higher education institutions and ITE programmes. I am deeply appreciative of the strong co-operation and leadership which has been shown in every facet of our education system.

Our students stay with us for only a finite period, but their education stays with them for the entirety of their lives. Working in the education sector is, as I have consistently noted, both a gift and a responsibility. W. B. Yeats reminds us that 'education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire'. We in education must acknowledge the gift and embrace the responsibility of continuing to light that fire for the generations of students to come.

W.B. Yeats reminds us that 'education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire'.

Preparing for the Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education

The 2020 Programme for Government states, 'We will establish a Citizens Assembly on the future of education ensuring that the voices of young people and those being educated are central' (Government of Ireland, 2020). In this article, we describe how we might best prepare for the Assembly.

Introduction

The Citizens' Assembly for Education is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to discuss an issue that is fundamental to our society. The idea for the Assembly arose at a 2018 symposium at the Burren College of Art, 'Towards a More Creative Education System' (Burren College of Art, 2018; Hawkes, 2020). It flowed from a three-day meeting of students, teachers, policymakers, parents, union representatives, artists, and other educators. The deliberative nature of the symposium resulted in a refreshingly honest and open discussion about the nature and purposes of education.

Educational discourse in Ireland can be complex: A lot of people have a lot to say, and all feel, to an extent, that their view is the correct one. All of us, having gone to school, have first-hand experience of the system and tend to have set views on its purpose and operation. In such an environment, there is often little room for people to listen to and hear one another's views in a way that would allow us, as a nation, to reflect on unhelpful aspects of our system and consider how they might be imagined differently, piloted, and reflected upon honestly.

Building on the potential shown at the Burren College of Art in 2018, and the successes of previous Citizens' Assemblies, where deliberation and informed conversations have empowered Irish citizens to think deeply about challenging issues, the government has committed to holding a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education where the voices of those being educated are central.

In May 2022, the Burren College of Art held another symposium – a creative exploration of how to make the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education as effective as possible. Over 60 people, representing all sectors in Irish education, met to consider the following:

- What are the most important questions for the Assembly to address?
- How might the Assembly be designed and hosted?



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- How might the role of young people be best accommodated?
- What might happen before, and after, the Assembly to facilitate its potential to effect change?

Topics for the Assembly

While familiar issues such as Leaving Certificate reform, school patronage, student and staff well-being, and special education were central to the conversations at the Burren College of Art symposium in 2022, there was consensus that these challenging topics can only be developed meaningfully in the context of broader questions: What is education for? How can our education system contribute to building a successful and sustainable society? By asking big questions about the purposes of education, the Assembly might learn about the values and lived experiences that citizens have with respect to education.

Such a framing will allow us to celebrate what is good in Irish education and to reimagine how our education system meets our collective needs, while cherishing each citizen. It is from this place that necessary conversations about specific education reforms might take place. Care must accordingly be given to the Assembly's terms of reference. Were these terms to focus exclusively on a contentious topic, a narrow, fractious debate may result, with little space given to the bigger issues informing people's perspectives.

On the other hand, terms of reference that are too 'meta' may fail to focus on the concrete realities of education in Ireland. A middle ground must be found that facilitates the bigger questions and connects these to specific issues of concern for Irish citizens. The processes used to run the Assembly will be key to this.

The Assembly as a process

A recent article by Professor David Farrell, whose research focuses on Citizens' Assemblies, pointed to the need for care in how they operate, if they are to be impactful (Farrell, 2022). The choice of Assembly chair, the location, and the time given for the Assembly to do its work are all important factors to consider.

Creativity was key to unlocking the collective potential of those who attended the symposia at the Burren College of Art – might it do the same for an Assembly? Might an Assembly meet at schools around the country? Might it be facilitated, rather than 'chaired'? Would universal design for learning ensure a diversity of voices?

If a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education is to breathe life into a system, rather than add to the 'initiative overload' felt by so many working in our education system, then care must be given to how it runs.

Centring the voice of those being educated

Young people had a transformative effect on the Burren College of Art symposia. Unfiltered, first-hand accounts of lived experience ensured that conversations were 'real' and cut through a lot of the politics that makes many conversations about education so challenging. Care will be needed to ensure that this cohort are given an equal footing in the Assembly.

“Unfiltered, first-hand accounts of lived Experience ensured that conversations (at the Burren College of Art symposia) were 'real' and cut through a lot of the politics that makes many conversations about education so challenging.”

The Lundy model of participation offers ways for young people to exercise their right to have due weight given to their views. Were an Assembly on the future of education to fully embrace an inclusive approach such as this – rather than adopt a more tokenistic approach to youth participation – then the process and learning could be transformative.

Preparing for the Assembly

In a written response to a parliamentary question from Labour Party leader Ivana Bacik, dated 22 November 2022, Taoiseach Micheál Martin stated:

The Government is committed to establishing the next Citizens' Assemblies, on Drug Use and the Future of Education, at the earliest opportunity following the completion of the assemblies currently underway [Biodiversity Loss and Dublin Local Government].

The timelines and terms of reference for the next assemblies will ultimately be a matter for the Oireachtas to agree on. It is anticipated that the Government will consider the matter early in the New Year, following which motions will be put before Dáil and Seanad Éireann for debate, setting out timelines and Terms of Reference for the new assemblies.

Mindful of this time frame, it is essential that preparatory work begin without delay.

Attendees of the 2022 symposium at the Burren College of Art felt that those tasked with setting up and running the Assembly should hear from a diverse range of voices, using diverse strategies to do so. Care might be given to collect people's education stories. Schools and their communities might be supported to facilitate conversations about education.

On this point, the successful BEACONS process, run by the Teaching Council to support conversations about education at local community level, could be used across the country (Teaching Council, 2019). Such 'from the heart' stories will help the Assembly learn from people's lived experience of education. As well as these local conversations, the various stakeholders in Irish education would consider the potential of a Citizens' Assembly through their own internal processes.

In the words of Minister for Education Norma Foley, the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education represents a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reimagine education and to consider Ireland's education needs' (O'Brien, 2022). For us to make the most of that opportunity, the Citizens' Assembly on the future of education should be a well-informed, inclusive process that celebrates the best of education in Ireland and gives us the prospect of renewal.

With the Assembly fast approaching, now is the time to spark national and local conversations about education – conversations that feed into the Assembly, and flow from it. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for us to talk about the most important investment each of us can make in our lives – our education. Let's embrace it.

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Learning to Work in the 21st Century

The worlds of education, training, and work have been transformed in recent times and continue to change constantly, with globalisation and digital technology at the centre. This article surveys the evolution in the nature of employment and careers, identifying the driving forces and anticipating what lies ahead for students and workers in Ireland.



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Introduction

In the last decade of the 20th century, in the literature on vocational issues, signals appeared of changes taking place in the world of work that would significantly affect how people experience employment and develop their careers. These changes were variously described in terms of 'postmodernism', 'post-industrial society', and so on, but a key element identified by most commentators was globalisation. Beck (1999, 2000) developed the term 'reflexive globalisation' to describe the complex interplay of social, political, and economic effects that now influence how the labour market operates in even the most advanced economies.

These effects include the transnational movement of capital; the growth of international businesses in which investment, production, distribution, and marketing may be located in various countries; local disintegration of work communities and the parallel integration of new, transnational employment sectors; and loss of the physical and spatial dimensions of jobs – where workers used to migrate to access jobs in 'successful places', jobs can now move rapidly across countries to seek more favourable locations such as new, purpose-built facilities, low taxation regimes, and suitable workforces. Beck notes that an effect of these changes is a movement away from stable, standardised employment relationships towards flexible, informal, discontinuous, and often precarious labour contracts.

There was also a compelling debate in the career guidance literature about the kind of career that would be experienced by those working in this globalised context. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) describe the phenomenon of 'boundaryless careers' – the opposite of the organisational career, which unfolds in a single employment situation. Hall (2002) describes a move towards 'protean' careers, characterised by mobility, a whole-life perspective, and a developmental progression – essentially managed by the person, not the organisation in which they are employed at any given time.

Another major change now taking place is the rapid shift towards knowledge-based businesses and processes in existing business

models. Apart from the proliferation of knowledge-intensive communities, the trend is for the rapid introduction of new technologies into occupational areas that have until recently been characterised as 'low-tech', so that very few jobs today can be performed without at least some familiarity with computers and communications technology.

This change has been acknowledged in European policy for some time: the Lisbon agenda in 2000 set out as a goal that Europe should become, by 2010, 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. While it may be that this goal is yet to be achieved, there has no doubt been a dramatic change in the range of jobs available in the European labour market. All countries report diminishing traditional trades and professions and the emergence of new occupations, most of which require workers familiar with new technology and capable of continuing learning to adapt to new processes as they are introduced on an ongoing basis.

A globalised world of work

The knowledge-based, globalised world of work demands a new paradigm of vocational learning, based more on self-directed continuous learning than on initial mastery of a fixed curriculum. To succeed in this world, the worker needs opportunities to achieve learning outcomes appropriate for a career that may be varied and non-linear, leading to qualifications that can enable participation in various occupational roles and that can be extended and adapted through further learning to support career change.

This learner may well enter and re-enter formal learning at various stages, participating in programmes that are variously designed and delivered in general education, further education, and higher education contexts. This career-long learning goes beyond the constant updating of technical knowledge and skill; it also pertains to the capacity to understand and anticipate change. David and Foray (2002) underscore the importance in a knowledge-based economy of generic learning abilities – learning to learn, knowing what we do not know, the heuristic ability to discover knowledge for oneself. It is as important to have a firm command of such abilities, they say, as it is to be able to master a specific repertoire of technical skills.

To what extent does Beck's analysis of the effects of globalisation apply in Ireland today? Are the new career models described by Hall and by Arthur and Rousseau already being undertaken by Irish workers? In what ways are the concepts of globalisation and new careers affecting the expectations of young people who will soon approach the labour market in Ireland?

The effects of globalisation are already evident in many areas of the economy. This is not surprising, as we have a small, open economy and (with the departure of the UK) the least regulated labour market in the EU.

The effect is most apparent in the big transnational businesses that have located here in recent years. However, it is also the case that many Irish companies have become partners in international businesses or have even been absorbed into multinationals, so that decisions about recruitment and other aspects of human resource management are often conditioned by factors outside the local economy. Even companies that remain wholly indigenous find that they have to compete on global markets, and to do this effectively they need to be as flexible and quick-reacting as their competitors around the world.

In this new world of work, what are the competences that young learners of today will require for the type of new career that may lie before them? Commentators suggest that two meta-competences – identity growth and adaptability – are the core resource, to be augmented at various stages by a range of specific career skills (know why, how, whom, what, where, and when) (DeFillippi & Arthur 1996; Jones & DeFillippi, 1996). How well do learning opportunities in Ireland today support learners to develop these competences and skills? What is being done to enhance current provisions to better address future learning needs?

Changes in Ireland

The education and training world in Ireland has been transformed over the past 20 years. In the primary sector, new models of school patronage have evolved to meet the changing expectations of a more multicultural generation of parents, and the training of primary teachers has been almost fully integrated into the higher education system. In many of our areas of high population growth, dynamic new post-primary schools offer broad curricula including cutting-edge programmes in new technologies; the Junior Cycle experience for learners has been transformed, and modernisation of the Senior Cycle offer is progressing.

A new further education and training sector has been created, encompassing and refocusing the agendas of a plethora of previous bodies. SOLAS and the education and training boards are already familiar entities, and their work is driving many innovative programmes, including a rapidly expanding range of new apprenticeships, some of which address learning and qualification needs for jobs that did not exist at the turn of the century.

Higher education and training in Ireland now includes several emerging technological universities. In addition to their traditional offer of programmes aimed at students transitioning from post-primary education, most of our higher education institutions now offer a growing number of programmes (many funded through the Springboard initiative) designed to support learners in upskilling and achieving new qualifications for career change or advancement, or to address skill gaps identified in our rapidly evolving labour market.

A key change agent underpinning many of these developments was the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications in 2003, based on the concept of defining qualifications in terms of the learning outcomes

Career-long learning goes beyond the constant updating of technical knowledge and skill; it also pertains to the capacity to understand and anticipate change.

required for an award. This opened the way for the development of new qualifications at every level in the system, from major awards such as degrees to awards for narrow sets of learning outcomes.

It is perhaps seldom acknowledged that these very significant changes have not been random occurrences: they are all elements in an ongoing process of development, driven by policy lines that have been maintained across several governments and that have involved the participation and collaboration of various government departments and statutory bodies and agencies.

The creation of the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is the most significant structural change in the Irish education system in recent times. In a recent opinion piece, Minister Simon Harris succinctly and explicitly outlines 'a substantial agenda for change' (Harris, 2022): he foresees a 'single system' responding to a learner's 'individual talents, ambitions, and motivations' in which 'every step has to be recognised' with appropriate awards. He signals an end to the notion that tertiary education is to be accessed once in a person's lifetime; as a first step he proposes to create 'a single hub of information for third-level access, where entry requirements and transition opportunities are understood and not hidden away'. He mentions 'joint further and higher education courses', 'apprenticeships becoming the heart of the technological university agenda', 'more Masters and PhD apprenticeship programmes' – and much more.

Clearly, while the education community at large is undoubtedly entitled to feel that they have achieved a lot over the past 20 years, any sense of satisfaction should be leavened by an understanding that the development must continue and that change is to be a fact of life in the years ahead. As Beckett (1989) might have put it, we have to be ready to change – change again – change better!

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The European Dimension in Irish Education and the Challenges of Brexit

Reflections on 50 years of Ireland's EEC/EU membership

This major article explores how Ireland's education system has engaged with the European Union since accession to the EEC 50 years ago. The role of Europe at all levels of Irish education has changed significantly over the years, and the consequences of these changes are often overlooked. Given how much of our daily lives are informed by decisions made at EU level, it is vital that we retain and foster a European consciousness being lost in the global orientation of educational policy.

Introduction

Next year Ireland will mark the 50th anniversary of its entry into the European Union's (EU) predecessor, the European Economic Community (EEC), on 1 January 1973. This may be an appropriate time to reflect on the role the European dimension has played in Irish education during this period. Education is all too often overlooked in discussions about the EU, which tend, not only in Ireland, to limit themselves to political, economic, and legal aspects.¹

Ireland's membership in the EU has undoubtedly been good for the country. Economically, Ireland has developed dramatically over the last 50 years (though not without occasional, equally dramatic, setbacks). It has overtaken many other economies to become one of the wealthiest EU member states and a net contributor to the EU budget, though we have come to doubt the general validity of some standard economic measurements.

Membership has also helped to substantially modernise and liberalise Irish society, improving women's rights, increasing worker protection, protecting our physical environment, and generally broadening our perspective by allowing Ireland to measure itself against its European peers. In the decades following accession, Irish education responded positively to the Europeanisation of Irish society by building European elements into courses and curricula at all levels, reflecting a degree of enthusiasm in educational circles about the new possibilities opening up, especially for young people.



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This has served Ireland well: several Irish people who came to play key roles in the EU, such as Catherine Day and David O'Sullivan as the EU Commission's Secretaries-General, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly, and Commissioner Mairead McGuinness, were all products of the early phase of membership. They allowed Ireland to box above its weight in the EU. From 1987 onwards, the education system benefitted – as it still does – from the Erasmus programme which the late Peter Sutherland, during a brief spell as Commissioner for Education, helped to establish – not to mention schemes such as Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci, and Jean Monnet, all of which make up Erasmus+ now.

At third level the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick opened its doors 50 years ago, in October 1972, and set itself up to become Ireland's most European-focused third-level institution, pioneering an undergraduate degree in European Studies and making European languages compulsory for all (!) students in the early years. Brigid Laffan, founder of the Dublin European Institute, and later director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence, was a much sought-after commentator on European affairs in Ireland and elsewhere, and was among the first cohort of European Studies students in Limerick.

In light of these frequently mentioned European impacts on Irish education, a recent column by *Irish Times* Brussels correspondent Naomi O'Leary showed that things may have shifted considerably. She reported that since 2015, 'only 22 Irish candidates have passed the generalist and specialist competitions to join the European Commission, excluding linguistics, which is insufficient to replace the 69 Irish officials who are due to depart' (O'Leary, 2022).

This is a development of huge concern to the Irish government, which is anxious to maintain its influence in Brussels. Ironically it comes at a time when Irish applicants – as native speakers of the EU's lingua franca, replacing departing British staff – should be doing particularly well in EU competitions. The comparatively low achievement level in languages is one factor in a competition that requires high-level competence in another EU language. But closer examination makes it more likely that there are deeper reasons why fewer Irish young people covet such positions – that in fact Irish education has lost much of its European focus, and consequently the EU is less on young people's radar than it used to be.

Quite rightly the Department of Foreign Affairs' recruitment strategy *A Career for EU*, designed to encourage Irish young people to apply for positions in EU institutions, aims among other actions to concentrate its activities on Irish schools (DFA, 2022, p.17). The number of courses at third-level institutions with a European focus has declined noticeably. From experience as course director of one of the two CAO-listed bachelor of arts programmes in European Studies left in the country, I have for years been confronted with first-year students who report that they learnt very little, if anything, about the EU during their 12 years of formal schooling.

Irish education has lost much of its European focus, and consequently the EU is less on young people's radar than it used to be.

Three strategy papers issued since 2016 by the Department of Foreign Affairs aim to put Ireland's relationship with Germany (2017), France (2019), and the Scandinavian countries (2021) on a more comprehensive and solid footing.

This arguably reflects broader trends in society where, increasingly, much of what has been achieved is taken for granted. In a way the EU has been a victim of its own success: the peace and prosperity it has brought have blotted out the memory of the wars that preceded it (though the current conflict in Ukraine is a stark reminder); the freedoms and protections we enjoy seem no longer to require effort and engagement.

The declining importance and increasing invisibility of the European dimension in Irish education comes at a particularly inopportune time, since the Brexit decision of our nearest neighbour in June 2016 has ushered in momentous changes that have fundamentally altered our relationship with the EU. It has accelerated the key ambition of those advocating membership in the 1970s: to come out of the shadows of the erstwhile colonial power, the United Kingdom, to further reduce Ireland's economic dependency on the UK, and to forge our own independent and confident way in Europe.

There is ample evidence that our accelerating integration has intensified our direct contacts with key fellow member states, both politically and economically. Three strategy papers issued since 2016 by the Department of Foreign Affairs aim to put Ireland's relationship with Germany (2017), France (2019), and most recently the Scandinavian countries (2021) on a more comprehensive and solid footing. These are mirroring politically the construction of the Celtic Interconnector power cable with France and the ever-increasing direct trade expressed, for instance, by the near four-fold increase, in 2021, of direct freight shipments within one year, a 69% increase in passenger numbers in Rosslare's Europort alone, and the decline of the land bridge via the UK (Carswell, 2022).

If the regularly published Eurobarometer opinion polls are any indication, the general public is content with these trends: our attitude is solidly pro-European, with 70% of respondents having a positive image of the EU and only 6% a negative image in the latest poll (no. 97) of summer 2022. Ireland has in fact the most positive image of the EU, and the likelihood is that these are long-term trends, supported further by the political chaos and economic damage that Brexit continues to inflict on the UK.

That there is a mismatch between post-Brexit developments and educational policy is suggested in the 2019 strategy paper *Cumasú: Empowering through Learning*. In his foreword, then Minister Joe McHugh wrote:

We face many challenges, including the potential impact of Brexit on education and training. While my Department's response will continue to evolve, we will maintain and progress collaboration on a North-South and East-West basis to ensure that the education and training system is maintained and, in particular, that the peace dividend experienced since the Good Friday Agreement can be supported. We will continue to engage in cooperation and partnership to best deliver the skills and services that learners need – ní neart go cur le chéile. (DES, 2019, p.8)

We must conclude that Irish education is content with looking east and north, rather than towards Europe, adopting a rather Hiberno-centric and insular perspective that focuses on the undoubted problems for Ireland rather than the spectacular rise of new opportunities that Brexit has created for young people.

Global turn

It is, however, less such insular perspectives that have relegated the European dimension to near invisibility over the last two decades. As Ireland came to regard itself as 'one of the most globalised economies in the world' (ESRI, 2013), the perspective of Irish education also went global. This is indicated clearly in the key strategy paper *Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016–2020*, which preceded Brexit. The strategy explicitly aims at developing Ireland 'to become internationally recognised for the development of global citizens'. In the words of Minister Richard Bruton, it aims

to support the development of global citizens through Ireland's high-quality international education system, by attracting talent from around the world to our education institutions, equipping Irish learners with the skills and experience they need to compete internationally, engaging in world-class research and international collaborations, and addressing global challenges. (DES, 2016, p.5)

“As Ireland came to regard itself as 'one of the most globalised economies in the world' (ESRI, 2013), the perspective of Irish education also went global.”

While there are good arguments for broadening the perspective of Irish education, the effect of the global turn has been, as evidence suggests, that the European dimension has become well-nigh invisible and merged into the 'global' label – as if Ireland had the same relationship with China and Singapore that it has with Germany or France. When the government's *Languages Connect* strategy of 2017 demands that 'the education system must support learners of all ages to gain the skills and confidence to be not only Irish and EU citizens but also global citizen' (DES, 2015, p.5), it seems to assume that the Irish education system already equips Irish students to become EU citizens, that this is a sign of the past, a point of departure.

But this is not the case. There are good reasons to believe that young Irish people's sense of European citizenship is poorly developed and that its development is no longer a priority of the educational system. Nor is there any sign that, five years after the Brexit referendum, the global orientation of educational policy – which is in line with UK educational thinking – is to be revised, at a time when the globalised system, due to both Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, is increasingly questioned.

Languages

Languages are a good indicator for Ireland's real engagement with the EU, as only 1.5% of its citizens speak English as their mother tongue. It was therefore appropriate that *Languages Connect* was among the first strategy papers occasioned by Brexit. It was to then Minister Bruton's great credit that he set specific and ambitious five-year targets in an Implementation Plan for 2017–2022.

Now that the first five years are up, it is obvious that hardly any of the increases targeted in the various sectors have been achieved. While there can be no argument that Covid-19 impacted especially negatively on language learning, as it relies heavily on face-to-face interaction, it is open to debate whether any of the targets would have been met had the pandemic not happened.

Looking at the sector I am most familiar with and the difficulty involved in even formulating clear languages policies, often against vested interest in the powerful STEM subjects, there is good reason for doubt: no Irish university is on course to meet the target of 20% of students studying a foreign language by 2030. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of language students is declining. This is not to deny the valiant work done by Post-Primary Languages Ireland to implement *Languages Connect*.

That Europe has been lost between the global and local agendas, and that the momentum characterising the era towards the end of the 20th century has dissipated, will become clear in the following brief review of the European dimension at the four levels of education.²

“The European dimension has become well-nigh invisible and merged into the 'global' label – as if Ireland had the same relationship with China and Singapore that it has with Germany or France.”

Primary sector

The scrapping of the Modern Languages in the Primary School pilot project, to save a minuscule amount of money in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, was a particularly short-sighted decision which has continued to throw a long shadow upon the present day. Not only did the project awaken children's interest in languages, it was also a key space where a sense of the EU and its cultural diversity could be developed.

Its removal indicated to parents that languages (beyond Irish) are not a priority. There are clear signs that modern languages are now going to be brought back into primary education, with the particular interest of the present Taoiseach adding momentum. They also feature prominently in the new *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* currently under discussion. This is one of the most hopeful signs in the present debate, but it will take considerable time to work itself through the system.

There has been a general trend towards outsourcing the European dimension to bodies external to the State system. This applies also the primary sector, where it has become the domain of organisations such as the European Movement, in the shape of the Blue Star programme or the exciting web-based Big Friendly Guide to the EU developed in University College Cork. These are both very successful programmes, but it has not been to the benefit of the European dimension that it has always remained additional and voluntary instead of consciously and deliberately embedded in the State's curricula.

That this is likely to continue is evident in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, the blueprint for the coming decades, which is otherwise full of exciting new educational departures. The framework claims to prepare children for 'tomorrow's world' but takes no account of European integration; in fact, the words *Europe* and *European* are conspicuous by their absence in the whole text. The competency of 'being an active citizen' – a hugely significant and welcome new area that the framework introduces – 'develops children's capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society at local, national and global levels, and fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately towards the creation of a more sustainable and just world' (NCCA, 2020, p.8).

These are worthwhile overall aims, but it is striking that the world outside Ireland appears to be treated equally as elements of the 'global level'; there is no level between the national and the global. This does nothing to enable children, even at this young age, to grasp the basics of European citizenship, of which they can see evidence with their own eyes on the cover of the maroon passports. Nor is any distinction made between EU languages and other languages.

Second-level education

Similar trends inform curricular developments at second level. The European Studies Project funded by EU cross-border funding petered out in the boom years. Although the European Parliament Liaison Office's (EPLO) Ambassador Schools programme is expanding, it only ever reaches a small number of schools, regularly fighting against much more immediate pressures faced by teachers and management.

There has also been a significant increase in EU-funded Erasmus+ activities, but their impact will always be limited as long as they remain a voluntary element to Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Transition Year, neither of which students (and occasionally their parents) tend to take seriously enough, conditioned as they are in the centrality of grades. Nor are many teachers comfortable with teaching a subject they may not feel too informed about themselves.

“The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework claims to prepare children for 'tomorrow's world' but takes no account of European integration; in fact, the words *Europe* and *European* are conspicuous by their absence in the whole text.

“Although the European Parliament Liaison Office's (EPLO) Ambassador Schools programme is expanding, it only ever reaches a small number of schools, regularly fighting against much more immediate pressures faced by teachers and management.

The CSPE curriculum is indicative of the change of focus. Introduced in 1997 (and revised in 2003), the discontinued curriculum stated, 'Citizenship Education aims at creating knowledge of the political system operating in Ireland, Europe and the world' (DES, 2005, p.20). Unit 4, 'Ireland and the World', mentions the aspects 'MEP', 'European Commission', 'European Union', and 'European Parliament' and adds: 'These questions can be explored through study of Ireland's membership of international groupings, for example the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations' (ibid., p.15).

In contrast, the Junior Cycle curriculum for CSPE (2016, updated in 2021) only uses the term 'global citizenship'. The EU appears in a single phrase under 'Exploring Democracy', which has the objective of enabling students to 'use the correct terminology to describe Irish and European democratic institutions, structures, political parties and roles' (NCCA, 2021, pp. 9, 15) – a much narrower approach which limits itself effectively to naming the EU institutions.

The global turn at second level takes the form of introducing development education and global justice, both unquestionably admirable and valuable objectives that are becoming the predominant objectives of citizens' education. Yet why this shift should effectively replace all curricular traces of Europe is entirely unclear, especially as the EU is increasingly a key player in alleviating the consequences of global injustices, in particular from climate change. Politics and Society is a welcome addition to the list of Leaving Cert subjects and offers a significant space for European Studies, but its impact, with only around 4% sitting the exam four years after its introduction, will not change the overall picture in the near future.

While the teaching of modern languages contrasts positively with its catastrophic decline in the UK, it has not seen the increases demanded by *Languages Connect*. It was always problematic that no clear budget accompanied the measures beyond setting up and staffing the very active post-primary languages initiative. Between 2017 and 2022 there has been no increase in the number of students sitting the Leaving Cert exam in modern languages but merely a diversification.

While this is welcome considering the traditional overwhelming predominance of French, much of it is due to facilitating immigrant native speakers of eastern European EU languages rather than Irish learners. The only noticeable shift in actual language learning has been from French and German to Spanish, mirroring trends in the UK. This contradicts trade links, which continue to expand with the two most powerful countries and economies in the EU.

There may be good reasons to regret the lack of progress made with German in particular, spoken by the largest language community in the EU, not only for economic reasons but also because its media give a good impression of

where the debate about the EU may be heading next. Sadly, the ambitious doubling of modern language assistants envisaged by *Languages Connect* has been badly affected by Covid-19 restrictions; the presence of those assistants adds a hugely beneficial real-life European dimension to every school they teach in.

Third level

The neglect at second level filters down into demand for Europe-related courses. Anyone teaching in European Studies at third level will have long witnessed a decline in applicants for such programmes or for other programmes with an explicit European focus. Whoever wants a fuller picture might compare the courses listed in the European Movement's 2011 guide *Studying Europe: An Audit of EU-Related Qualifications in the Irish Third-Level Sector* with the situation today. It shows that a similar contraction occurred at postgraduate level.

The Department of Foreign Affairs' well-intentioned measure, aimed at increasing the quality of Irish applicants for posts in the EU, of awarding scholarships only for courses at the College of Europe in Bruges and in Natolin, Warsaw, did little to increase applications for any of the master of arts courses running at Irish universities. Research centres with a European focus are significantly smaller now than a decade ago; the Dublin European Institute at University College Dublin is an example, though some have been revived and new ones have been established as a result of substantial EU funding.

“ Research centres with a European focus are significantly smaller now than a decade ago.”

Third level has perhaps been the main driver of the global strategy, developed when all sectors of education were still under a single departmental roof. As the widespread trend towards the commodification of education continued, especially in the Anglophone world, Irish universities found new markets in Asia, where students paying high non-EU fees became a vital source of income that allowed universities to cope with the chronic underfunding of the sector.

Several international offices were renamed *global* after the institution's name (e.g., Trinity Global), while the visibility of the European dimension was often reduced to the letter E in Erasmus+; Erasmus exchanges became a sector of 'global mobilities'. The need for additional income put pressure on Erasmus: the programme cost money rather than bringing in additional funds, because all Irish universities – as very sought-after English-language destinations, especially after UK universities dropped out of Erasmus – regularly took in more students than they sent out.

The predominant global discourse in Irish universities had the effect that successes in acquiring major grants from Erasmus+ or Jean Monnet programmes were rarely considered headline news: take for example Irish universities' spectacular performance in the new area of Teacher Education in 2021, when three out of twenty major Jean Monnet grants

awarded EU-wide went to Ireland. Now that Ireland's universities are eager to increase their participation in EU-funded programmes, especially in Horizon Europe, there is a danger that their reduced European focus may work against them, as the multi-billion-euro programme, quite rightly, expects programmes to be firmly embedded in an EU framework.

Third level has not even begun to take languages seriously again, though this is demanded by both the internationalisation strategy and *Languages Connect*. There are few credible ideas about how to improve the uptake of languages by students; many lecturers themselves may have internalised the idea that English is enough. The number of academic staff willing and able to read and integrate research findings in another EU language in their teaching may actually be lower than that of their students. The consequence is that a purely Anglophone and non-European perspective pervades virtually all disciplines outside modern languages, accelerated by global ranking exercises which only take English-language publications into account.

Lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning was a casualty of the financial crisis. As the utilitarian understanding of education to improve career prospects took hold, interaction with the community moved into the background.

However, as all European societies age, Ireland only a little later than others, universities are starting to take the first tentative steps in the direction of age-friendly universities.

“ Third level has not even begun to take languages seriously again, though this is demanded by both the internationalisation strategy and Languages Connect.”

This is relevant in the present context. Already now the predominance of older citizens is noticeable in public debates with an EU focus, such as those in the Conference on the Future of Europe. This can be read negatively as another indicator of a generational decline of interest in matters European, but it can also be turned into a positive

asset: Those with pre-1973 memories are well placed to tell the younger generation what has been achieved and remind them how much they take for granted in their daily lives.

Such intergenerational discourses can be extremely fruitful, injecting real-life experiences into the teaching of European Studies at all levels. Nor is there any reason why educators in European Studies should not also focus on older age groups in outreach activities as long as demand from younger generations remains low. It is an ever-growing sector of society that citizenship education under-serves. It is also one that, in contrast to many younger voters, overwhelmingly goes to the polls. Politicians take heed!

Towards a social and cultural turn of European Studies

This brings us to the content of European Studies, more specifically European Union Studies. It has not added to the field's attractiveness that

it has generally remained wedded to the disciplines of politics, economics, and, at third level, law. Only a limited number of students are especially interested in these aspects; the lack of interest in politics among Irish students relative to their EU peers is often commented upon. The issues that European integration and EU citizenship entail go much further than that and involve questions of identity, openness, tolerance towards other world views, interest in other cultures, and a sense of European togetherness.

These cannot all be dealt with in a few hours in citizenship education. It would be a misunderstanding of the concept of European Studies if it remained compartmentalised into CSPE and the new Leaving Cert subject of Politics and Society. There are good arguments for reviewing all subjects with regard to their European dimensions, as is already the case with subjects such as Economics, Geography, and History.

The modern European languages classroom offers a particularly suitable environment for adding colour to European Union Studies, especially when augmented by school exchanges. Often overlooked are the subjects of Art History and Religious Education. But where the European dimension must make its mark is in the curricula of Irish and English, two compulsory subjects studied by the overwhelming majority of Irish students.

After the full implementation of Irish as an official EU language at the beginning of 2022, a European 'overhaul' could be of great benefit to the often little-loved subject. It would highlight not only its current relevance but also the job opportunities in the EU that excellent Irish opens up for Irish students. English also deserves a closer look, given that the language has become young people's lingua franca in the EU: far too little use is made of creative material such as European films, travel writing, European literature in translation, and texts that reflect more profoundly on European versus national identity and the cultures of other member states.

Ireland's Europeanness is also reflected in many Irish literary and journalistic texts; some interesting material for teaching purposes for the English classroom can be found in the recently published *Kaleidoscope 2: Europe in Ireland* website by the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS, 2021), where well-known Irish writers reflect on their experience of the EU and what it means to them.

Schools are best placed to remind their students in all classes that there may be specific European perspectives and interests on all matters that reveal themselves only after the first 10 US and UK entries on Google have been bypassed, with discussions on the war in Ukraine offering a striking example. This is a better argument than the merely practical, economic one for why English is not enough. Young people themselves know more about some European (non-English-language) social media sites that they may find interesting to explore.

Conclusion

Mary Harney's dictum of 2000 that Ireland was spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin may have been overstating the case, but there can be no question that belonging to the Anglophone world will always militate against European perspectives in Irish culture, as will US-based social media giants. This will continue to encourage many young people to think of working in Australia, Canada, the US, and even the UK before they contemplate other EU member states. It is an open question whether the majority will ever want to adopt the 'Berlin perspective'.

At the same time, it is the job of Irish educational institutions to instil a consciousness in coming generations that will help them master the challenges of the future, a future in which Europe and the EU will play a key role. As it is unlikely that the marginalisation of the European dimension in Irish education is explicitly wanted – the Eurobarometer suggests otherwise – it is more a matter of making this explicit once again. If Irish education is expected to give students a clear sense of the world they live in, this must entail spelling out how much of our daily lives are already determined by decisions made in Brussels.

This is particularly true for the area of sustainability, which is bound to inform Irish educational policy centrally in the coming decades: the framework for Ireland's response to climate change is set by the European Green Deal. Minister Eamon Ryan spoke at COP-27 in Sharm el-Sheikh not for Ireland but for the European Union. That Irish children should only be taught about one aspect of the two political identities on the cover of their passports can hardly be regarded as comprehensive.

It is no excuse that none of the issues outlined here are unique to Ireland and that similar trends can be observed all over the EU, even in terms of learning EU languages beyond English. Education systems throughout Europe struggle with finding a new purpose beyond being the key guardian of an increasingly outmoded concept of national identity. Nor should the EU be considered a danger in this regard: against the massive daily onslaught of Americanised social media culture, the EU is the last bastion of cultural and linguistic diversity.

There are many signs that young people are willing to take up opportunities where they are offered: the substantial number of Erasmus+ student exchanges, rising numbers participating in the activities offered by the EPLO, the European Movement, and Léargas are a good basis to build on. Perhaps the introduction of a bachelor of arts course in European Studies in Ireland's largest university, University College Dublin, in 2021 is an indication that the tide might be turning (UCD, 2022). The goodwill and enthusiasm displayed by all participants at the first symposium on the European dimension in Irish education at the University of Limerick in May 2022, which brought professionals from all levels of education together, is also a very hopeful sign (UL, 2022).

“Europe in Ireland website by the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS, 2021) is a place where well-known Irish writers reflect on their experience of the EU and what it means to them.”

“If Irish education is expected to give students a clear sense of the world they live in, this must entail spelling out how much of our daily lives are already determined by decisions made in Brussels.”

The argument for moving the European dimension back into Irish education is broader than simply being the politically and economically sensible thing to do after Brexit. The future of the most successful inner-European peace project ever – brought into sharp relief by the war in Ukraine – lies in the hands of the coming generations. If we want the EU to continue and thrive, we will depend on young people's ideas, their imagination, and especially their willingness to fight for a better Europe that suits its citizens' needs.

It may even be appropriate occasionally to appeal to young people's sense of duty. Not only can we expect Irish young people who have benefitted so much from Ireland's membership of the EU to give something back in return for all the freedoms they enjoy, they also owe it to their peers across Europe who will depend on their engagement to build the EU of the future together.

Irish young people have so much to give – at the very least their unbeatable sense of irreverence and humour: the famous banner that young Irish soccer fans displayed in Poland, 'Angela Merkel thinks we are at work', is not only hilarious but also a profound expression of a developing European consciousness.

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ENDNOTES

1. See for instance this otherwise excellent recent survey: Holmes, M. and Simpson, K. (Eds.) (2021) *Ireland in the European Union: Economic, Political and Social Crises*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
2. Some arguments presented here are expanded in Fischer, J. (2022) 'Where is Europe in Irish education? Plaidoyer for a revival of European Studies in Irish schools after Brexit'. In: P. Carmichael and G. Holfter (Eds.) *Unions, Break-ups and Special Relationships: Aspects of Irish-German-UK Relations*, pp.113–134. Trier: WVT.

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1 Early Childhood



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

On the (very) bottom line: an Employment Regulation Order for ECEC.

Going to the market: sleepwalking into dependency.

Educating the whole child: realising children's rights to education in the context of the EU Child Guarantee.





Tales from A Thousand and One Nights?

New stories for Early Childhood Education and Care



In this overview of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland, Mathias Urban assesses the recent developments in the sector, including a new funding model and workforce plan from government. The article shows the problems with framing ECEC as a low-skilled 'service' sector or 'industry', warns against relying on corporate provision, and calls for an autonomous professional body for the sector and a Minister for ECEC.



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The stories we tell

Drafting this overview of developments and critical events in Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) on a night flight from Uzbekistan back to Ireland, I might be forgiven for my choice of title. And what better place to think about the stories we tell ourselves about the system and its condition than a 21st-century magic carpet flying high over Samarkand, the ancient city on the Silk Road?

Stories matter in early childhood education, and so does place. Samarkand is where the tales from *A Thousand and One Nights* originate. They were first told, the story goes, by Princess Shahrazad to Shahryar, the king of kings, to delay an undesirable turn of events, namely her own demise. A thousand years later, in 2022, Tashkent in Uzbekistan was host to the UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education – a place for the world to come together to create new stories about the future of early childhood education at a critical crossroad for humanity (UNESCO, 2022). The stories we tell ourselves in Ireland, and the storybook we contribute to at global events like the UNESCO conference, both matter: they frame how we make sense of the world, and of the place we occupy in it as early childhood educators, scholars, and advocates.

In previous contributions to *Ireland's Education Yearbook* (Urban, 2020, 2022b) I highlighted the persistent systemic challenges facing Irish ECEC, and the measures taken by key actors (government, unions, sector organisations) to mitigate them. The challenges are well documented by internal and external observers. For decades they have revolved around three key factors: *governance*, *resourcing*, and *professionalisation* of the system. As I reported last year, each has been at the centre of recent initiatives:

- an internal review of the government's *operational model*, distributed as it is between an array of departments and agencies, and the creation of Childcare Ireland as a one-stop shop (announced but not yet realised)
- a new funding model that introduces *core funding* as a step towards supply-side funding for early childhood services (DCEDIY, 2021b)
- a framework policy mapping out pathways to professionalisation for the entire early childhood workforce, including the sizable childminding sector (DCEDIY, 2021a).

I read these policy initiatives as a welcome step towards acknowledging that not all is well in Irish early childhood education and care. Policy is reacting to the multiple and persistent crises of an unsustainable ECEC system. As such, the bundle of policy initiatives must be welcomed as a serious attempt to improve the situation. Of the critical developments in the ECEC landscape, two stand out as particularly important.

The bare minimum?

First is the introduction of an Employment Regulation Order (ERO), or, to use its full title, 'An Order establishing statutory minimum remuneration and conditions of employment for certain grades in the early years' service industry' (DETE, 2022). This has been hailed as a substantial achievement because for the first time the ERO sets minimum wages for early childhood educators, which has been a long-standing demand by trade unions and early childhood professionals.

The ERO is the result of a negotiated agreement of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) established by the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, Damien English TD, in summer 2021. The point of a JLC is that it provides a legal forum for employers and worker representatives of a given 'employment sector' to come together 'in equal numbers' to 'discuss and agree proposals for terms and conditions to apply to specified grades or categories of workers in the sector concerned' (DETE, 2021).

Clearly, a set minimum wage for early childhood educators should be celebrated. Or should it? To begin with, the hourly rates agreed by the JLC and enshrined in the ERO are low. They range from €13 (€9 for under-18s!) to €17.25 depending on qualification and role (Workplace Relations Commission, 2022). Those rates are a fraction of the hourly rates of primary school teachers with a similar qualification level (€35.21 for new entrants). Proponents of the arrangement might argue that the ERO establishes, for the first time, a legal base, a bottom line, from which future increases can and will be negotiated in an established industrial-relations process. Surely, considering where we came from, the prospect of incremental change must be seen as progress?

Allow me to offer some critical observations. What exactly is the story that the ERO tells about early childhood education and care in Ireland? By

I would strongly encourage every early childhood educator to join a union.

subscribing to it, what story are we telling ourselves about who we are, as educators and, collectively, as the ECEC profession? On its website, the Workplace Relations Commission offers helpful insights: it confirms the principal purpose of an ERO, which is to fix 'minimum rates of pay and conditions of employment for workers in specified business sectors'. The sector to which the ERO applies is the 'Early Learning and Childcare Sector'. Leaving aside the continued use of the term ELC (rightly resisted as an inappropriate imposition by many early childhood educators), the ERO defines ECEC as a 'business sector'. This is in line with similar terminology used by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on its website. There, ECEC is referred to as the 'Early Years' Service Sector'. Not only does this add to the terminological confusion, it confirms a mindset: what early childhood educators do is provide a *service* within the frame of a *business sector*. It is revealing to read what sectors are subject to EROs. There are only three: Contract Cleaning, Security Industry, and Early Learning and Childcare Services.

Well-functioning ('industrial') relations between employers and employees are critical for any profession, and I would strongly encourage every early childhood educator to join a union. Having said that, I am concerned that what is at play here is a dangerous and counterproductive strategy that should be met with collective resistance and alternative proposals:

- The ERO confirms the view that ECEC is a 'service', to be provided in a 'business' model.
- It reaffirms the value placed on ECEC by grouping it with other low-wage, low-skill occupations, none of which are graduate-led.

Commenting on the establishment of the JLC in 2021, Early Childhood Ireland notes that *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* (DCYA, 2018) introduces a more ambitious view of the future of the ECEC profession:

This is essential as there is widely accepted evidence of the link between qualifications of childcare staff and quality of provision. The previous government accepted this evidence, and through the First 5, committed to measures that would bring early years education more in line with primary level education in pay, working conditions and qualifications. This commitment is also noteworthy because the only currently active JLCs are in three sectors: contract cleaning; hairdressing and security, none of which is graduate led. It seems reasonable to point out that educators in childcare settings are more similar to teachers, for whom an ERO would not be deemed either appropriate or acceptable. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021)

I agree with the concern expressed by Early Childhood Ireland. While the ERO might have a role to play in securing the bare minimum in remuneration, it certainly is not a helpful strategy to achieve professional recognition. Such recognition cannot be achieved by trade unions; it is not their role. The ELO process and its outcome highlight a persistent weakness of the

Irish ECEC landscape: the *workforce* consists of nearly 30,000 professionals, with the glaring absence of a (self-)organised, collective profession. I have argued before for the critical importance of a 'profession that thinks and speaks for itself' (Urban & Dalli, 2012) and can only reiterate the call for an autonomous professional body.

Alarming, too, is the persistent framing of ECEC as *service*, as *business*, and collectively as an *industry*. Missing from the picture is the critical role of realising *every child's right to education and care, from birth*.

Both developments – the framing as a low-skilled 'service' sector, and the persistent omission of the educational function of ECEC in the political and public debate – point to a larger problem: the apparent inability to imagine a radical change in how we, Irish society, take shared responsibility for realising the rights of all young children.

Nourishing care?

A second development in the ECEC landscape in 2022 adds to the picture. Announced in November 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) will run a pilot scheme that enables ECEC settings to provide food for children ('a range of meal options including the provision of hot meals'). €150,000 Dormant Accounts Funding has been set aside for the project (DCEDIY, 2022a). This clearly is a welcome and much-needed initiative. It recognises that food poverty and malnutrition are an increasingly common experience for young children in affluent societies like Ireland.¹ However, the pilot is embedded in the announcement made in the 2020 Programme for Government to develop a

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DEIS-type model for early learning and childcare, which aims to provide services with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports to support children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage. (Government of Ireland, 2020)

While targeted supports for disadvantaged and marginalised children are necessary, there appears to be a lack of imagination, political will, and strategy to move to a fully universal and rights-based model of early childhood education and care.

What other stories should we be telling?

The examples above add to the story – the overall narrative – of an ECEC environment that is moving towards the ambition laid out in *First 5* to develop an 'effective' system of supports for all young children in Ireland. Missing elements that are critical for the functioning of ECEC as a *system* (competent, effective. . .) are being put in place. It is a story of

slow, incremental development, but of movement in the right direction nonetheless. Inevitably, there are some embedded sub-plots, stories within stories, that disrupt the main narrative. Examples include the story of opposition to core funding, the story of reluctance among childminders to engage with the system, the story of poor communication of policy intentions and directions.

But the general picture is one of overdue, largely welcome, and positive developments. Let us acknowledge this for a moment. Then, let us turn to the stories we choose not to tell (ourselves and the world), and ask why that might be the case. This should provide possibilities for opening space for change. It will offer an opportunity to (re)connect Irish ECEC with the wider context of the world around us – the local with the global. I call them the stories of purpose.

The story of the market

“ Early childhood education and care in Ireland relies heavily on private enterprise, as does education in general.

The first of these is the story of the market. Early childhood education and care in Ireland relies heavily on private enterprise, as does education in general (Skerritt & Salokangas, 2020). With calls for a shift towards a public system, and de facto nationalisation during the Covid-19 pandemic, the debate tends to get stuck in a false dichotomy between private and public. As usual, things are more complex.

Private, in the Irish ECEC environment, is a broad term that covers very different types of arrangements and business models. Outside of the small but vibrant community and voluntary sector, most early childhood services are privately owned and run. This provides Ireland with a landscape of small services that are close to the families they serve, and have a stake in the community they are situated in. I see this as a strength and something we should value going forward. These services operate as businesses because that has traditionally been the only frame of reference. Increasingly, these services struggle with a burden of bureaucracy, administration, and accountability (e.g., inspections) – inevitable consequences of a more regulated system. Despite (or, some would argue, because of) new funding mechanisms, many of them also face challenges in their economic viability.

On the other end of the spectrum are large providers ('chains') that often operate in a global 'market', are controlled by international private equity, and are answerable to their shareholders. The purpose of these corporate 'childcare' providers is not primarily to serve a community but to return a profit. In a political climate of government commitment to increased funding, these corporations are finding the 'childcare' market irresistibly profitable. In 2020, for instance, Busy Bees, a UK-registered globally operating company that owns the Irish chain Giraffe, reported a 'profit margin of 31.5%, up from 26.3%' on its global operations. This is due not least to 'government support received during the year and close control of costs'.² There are several alarming aspects to this story of a successful business:

- First, corporate providers find it highly profitable to operate in an environment that continues to be chronically underfunded (according to government acknowledgement).
- Second, the 'profit' being made here is not a business surplus, to be reinvested in staff, premises, or quality for children. It is public money that is extracted from the Irish ECEC system and channelled to the company's shareholders.
- Third, the business model of Busy Bees (and similar globally operating corporations) rests on acquisitions – the buyout of existing services.

What are the implications for the future of Irish ECEC? My concern, shared by global analysts, is that Ireland is sleepwalking into dependency on corporate, private for-profit providers. Their presence in the Irish 'market' is limited for now, but the situation is changing. We will see an acceleration of buyouts of small services. This is one of the unintended consequences as small owner-operators look to exit an environment they find increasingly onerous.

Here, our Irish story connects with a wider global tale. Where we are now, others have been before. Countries like Australia, New Zealand, and, closer to home, Belgium have allowed the corporate takeover of ECEC before. Educators, children, families, and the public are now paying the price. The fallout of the collapse of the Australian ABC Learning in 2008 due to financial mismanagement is well documented (for an early analysis see Press & Woodrow, 2009). Aotearoa/New Zealand once had an early childhood landscape similar to ours: diverse, small-scale, a mix of community and private. Today more than half of all ECEC places in the country are provided by corporate for-profit chains. They extract public funding and exert pressure on government to lower quality standards and working conditions (Mitchell, 2002; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). Very recently, in Belgium, the NeoKids chain of nurseries filed for bankruptcy, leaving 400 families in Brussels high and dry, and leaving the State to pick up the pieces (Lyons, 2022).

At the moment it appears the Irish government has no strategy (no intention?) to counter predictable similar developments here. On the contrary, policy commitments to a 'fully publicly funded' ECEC system are a guarantee to underwrite corporate profits with public funds indefinitely. What is to be done? We need political leadership to initiate an informed debate about the difference between a 'publicly funded' system (which is what we have), and a universal, public, rights-based system of early childhood education and care. Necessary debate should be complemented by immediate measures:

- a public scheme to buy out any ECEC service looking to 'exit the market'³
- the announcement of a five-year transition to universal, public, rights-based ECEC, embedded in wider, integrated policies for children and families (see the 'story of survival' below)

“My concern, shared by global analysts, is that Ireland is sleepwalking into dependency on corporate, private for-profit providers.”

“Removing education from the naming of the field leaves practitioners with care (in its diminished technical reading) as their main task.”

- the phasing-out of any extraction of profits (non-reinvested surplus) from publicly funded services, over a five-year period, beginning now.

The story of the right to education

Just like the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the yet-untold stories of Irish early childhood education connect; they are embedded in each other. Once we agree to un-write and rewrite the story of the 'market', we can begin to imagine alternative stories of purpose. A critical one, I suggest, is the story of the right to education. Internationally, Ireland is not alone with its persistent split between 'childcare' and 'early education'. It is one of the few countries, though, that have dropped the concept of education from the nomenclature.

A short reminder: (*Early*) *Learning* is what every child does, all the time, from birth. Learning is a fundamental feature of human nature. *Education* is the purposeful interaction between adult and child, where learning unfolds in a relationship. It requires qualified educators. *Care*, too, is an essential feature of what makes us human. At its best, it is woven into any human interaction, regardless of the circumstances. Unfortunately, in our modern societies *care* has become a technical term for meeting people's basic (often physical) needs: to make sure they are safe, fed, and clean. This is not, I am aware, how most early childhood educators would describe their practice with children, yet it is a persistent image in our collective mind.

Removing *education* from the naming of the field leaves practitioners with *care* (in its diminished technical reading) as their main task. This feeds into the story of early childhood settings as a service industry, aptly placed together with cleaning and security: the story where the bare minimum is all we deserve. The elimination of *education* also feeds into the story of the market, where businesses are best placed to provide *care* as a service at the lowest possible cost.

Can we come together to imagine a different story? A story that evolves from the fundamental right to education for every child, from birth? 'Education', writes Siegfried Bernfeld (1925, 1973), is 'the sum total of the social reaction to the fact of ontogenetic postnatal development'. Educators, I add, are the mediators of the process, and therefore connected in their educational practice to both the child and society. To be an educator is to be a political and cultural professional (Freire, 1998). Reclaiming *education* as the central task of early childhood professionals challenges us to engage in public and political debate about how we, as a society, understand what education is for – its purpose – especially in relation to the youngest children.

This engagement becomes ever more important as the right to education from birth is acknowledged in global discourses and agreements: the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien Declaration), the World Education Forum (Dakar), and most recently the Tashkent Declaration

and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO, November 2022). At global level, too, the story of the right to education, from birth, connects to the story of the market. The Tashkent Declaration makes reference to another important international agreement: the Abidjan Principles, adopted in 2019, state as their 'overarching principle' that

States must provide free, public education of the highest attainable quality to everyone within their jurisdiction as effectively and expeditiously as possible, to the maximum of their available resources. (Abidjan Principles, 2019; see also Adamson et al., 2021)

As early childhood educators in a globally connected world, we should claim these principles for Ireland. The 'market' cannot realise the right to free, public education. As Koumbou Boly Barry, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, observes:

Without a rights-based framework, the financing, organization and provision of ECCE have been predominantly taken up by the private sector. (United Nations, 2022)

The story of survival

Finally, the story I suggest we should urgently begin to imagine might be called the tale of survival. It tells a complex, conflicted, but ultimately beautiful story about children and childhood in a difficult world. In Ireland, like in most European countries, we spend much time looking inward. Working hard to figure out the relationship between care and education, for instance, to arrive at the conclusion that the two are inseparable (hence *Early Childhood Education and Care*). However, it is increasingly evident that the story of ECEC must be embedded in a wider context – in the interest of children and for us, as a profession, to develop in a meaningful way.

The story begins with the realisation (far from surprising) that children are whole human beings from birth. What is puzzling, though, is that when it comes to early childhood services, we treat them as fragmented beings. To be cared for in one setting, educated in another, their health needs looked after by one profession (their nutrition needs often neglected), their rights to housing and shelter dealt with (or not) by yet another department – the list goes on. With its fragmented and dysfunctional ECEC system, Ireland has been catching up with international developments for some time, and much remains to be done.

Ireland has, however joined a global consensus about the right to holistic services for young children. The 2018 strategy *First 5* outlines a vision of a 'whole-of-government approach' to realising young children's rights. It is in line with what I call a global 'systemic turn' (Urban, 2022a; Urban & Guevara, 2019): the acknowledgment by governments and international agencies that

Ireland has joined a global consensus about the right to holistic services for young children.

services for young children are more effective where they are integrated to provide health, nutrition, well-being, care, and education, together with supports for parents.

A good example of the positive impact of such integrated services were the Sure Start Children's Centres in the UK (wilfully destroyed by successive Conservative governments). There are other examples from different global regions (Vargas-Barón et al., 2022). We know now that the success (or otherwise) of integrated services rests on how well they are embedded in multisectoral policy frameworks that bring together health, education, welfare, housing, labour, urban planning, and other policy areas.

At European Union level, the EU Child Guarantee is a first attempt to consolidate policy areas; it requires member states to develop their own action plans. Ireland's EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan was published in summer 2022 (DCEDIY, 2022b). While welcome, the plan is unambitious on early childhood education and care: it mainly lists existing policies. I believe it will be necessary for us, collectively, to take ownership of the policy and inscribe ourselves more assertively into the national action plan.

We must continue to work (argue, struggle) for a system that does what it is supposed to do: provide universal, free, rightsbased public early childhood education and care for all.

Where to from here?

As we move into another electoral cycle, I suggest we seize the opportunity to explore, map out, and specify policy choices and actions for the future of universal, rights-based, public ECEC, embedded in wider, systemic, multisectoral policies for young children. This is a call to debate, but let me offer some suggestions:

Let us not give in to POSIWID

Cyberneticist Stafford Beer (1926–2002) observed that quite often the de facto workings of a system are at odds with its official purpose. In his own words: 'there is no point in claiming that the purpose of a system is to do what it constantly fails to do'. Hence his dictum *the purpose of a system is what it does* (POSIWID). We must continue to work (argue, struggle) for a system that does what it is supposed to do: provide universal, free, rights-based public early childhood education and care for all.

Let us resist the market

Ireland has ambitious policies for young children (though they could be more ambitious). The idea that those policies, and the rights of children, families, and educators, could be realised by private for-profit enterprise is a fantasy. We need to enshrine the transition to a public system into parties' election manifestos.

Let us insist on a truly effective system

Fragmented governance remains one of the central problems for Irish ECEC. We should revisit the long-standing recommendation (by OECD and others) that all responsibility for ECEC should come under the auspices of one government department. There is currently no Minister for Early Childhood Education and Care, an absence that contributes to the lack of political leadership in relation to the field. Where should the Minister for ECEC be placed? Other countries situate ECEC in the Ministry for Education. That would be in line with the growing acknowledgement of the crucial educational function of ECEC (which extends beyond the limited remit of the ECCE 'free' preschool scheme).

It would require, however, a much broader debate about education (and the difference between education and schooling). Not an easy task in a country that so far has not achieved a public education system. The obvious alternative would be to strengthen the position of ECEC with the Department of Children. By that I mean not a further expansion of the departmental administration, but political leadership – the establishment of a Minister for ECEC.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, the 2022 Global Nutrition Report states: 'The United Kingdom is "off course" to meet all targets for maternal, infant and young child nutrition' (<https://globalnutritionreport.org/>). CSO data for Ireland show that in 2018, 8.7% of the population in the eastern and midlands region suffered 'moderate or severe food insecurity'. Disaggregated data, such as on the prevalence of stunting in young children, are outdated (www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-sdg2/irelandsunsdgs2019-reportonindicatorsforgoal2zerohunger/hunger/).
2. Figures provided by the Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability and Research (<https://cictar.org/>). Giraffe's parent company, Busy Bees, is majority-owned by a giant Canadian public pension fund, the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan (OTPP), and minority-owned (28%) by Temasak, a sovereign wealth fund of the Singapore government. See also Simon et al., 2022.
3. I am aware this will be a complex task, as it involves private property, mortgages, pensions, etc. However, I am confident that issues can be worked out provided there is political will.

"There is no point in claiming that the purpose of a system is to do what it constantly fails to do... *The purpose of a system is what it does.*"

(Cyberneticist Stafford Beer 1926–2002).

We must continue to work (argue, struggle) for a system that does what it is supposed to do: provide universal, free, rights-based, public early childhood education and care for all.

A Year of Significant and Progressive Change

In this article, Minister O'Gorman describes the significant developments that took place in early childhood education and care in Ireland in 2022 from the government's perspective, including major programmes and a new funding model. The article also outlines the reforms taking place that will continue in the years ahead.

In future years, I believe that 2022 will be recognised as a year of significant and progressive change in the area of early learning and childcare.

From low pay and issues with staff recruitment and retention, and the implications of this for children's experiences, to high out-of-pocket costs for families and historical levels of underinvestment by the State, there has been long-standing recognition of the challenges in early learning and childcare. That is why the government has committed to addressing each of these challenges, and 2022 was a year when we delivered real, substantive, and sustained change.

In early September, the Labour Court and the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail signed off on two Employment Regulation Orders (EROs) for the early learning and childcare sector. Negotiated by employers and unions, these EROs set out – for the first time – minimum hourly rates of pay for various roles in the sector, including higher minimum rates for lead educators and managers who are graduates.

Later that month, I launched Together for Better, a new funding model for early learning and childcare. Together for Better brings together three major programmes, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, including the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), and the new Core Funding scheme. A fourth programme, Tackling Disadvantage, is in development.

Importantly, this funding model recognises early learning and childcare as a public good, one which demands more investment and involvement by the State and a closer working partnership between the State and providers – with new responsibilities on both sides. This recognition of early learning and childcare as a public good is central to these reforms.

Core Funding, which has since delivered significant increases in funding to services around the country and supported pay increases



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Minister for Children,
Equality, Disability,
Integration, and Youth

for more than 70% of staff as well as a fee freeze for families, received the strong backing of the sector, with more than 94% of eligible services signing up.

Shortly after the launch of Together for Better, the government announced that as part of Budget 2023, State investment in early learning and childcare would exceed €1 billion. This is five years ahead of the target date set out in 2018 by the *First 5* strategy.

This includes a €346 million increase in 2022 investment levels alone, a substantial increase which will bring real benefits for children and their families. We are increasing investment into the National Childcare Scheme by €121 million, so all families accessing registered early learning and childcare will receive a minimum hourly NCS subsidy of €1.40 off the cost of early learning and childcare. With the current minimum hourly NCS subsidy set at €0.50 per hour, this represents an additional €0.90 per hour off the cost of early learning and childcare.

From 2 January 2023, any family who is not already at the maximum hourly subsidy under NCS will see an increase in their subsidy. For those who receive a subsidy based on an income-assessed subsidy, the amount of the increase will taper down as they approach the maximum hourly subsidy rate. This means that parents will see their fees reduce by an average of €1,200 per child per year, up to a maximum of €2,100 per child per year. In the context of a fee freeze in place across 94% of services – secured through Core Funding – this means real reductions to families' out-of-pocket costs.

I recognise that there are various arrangements for early learning and childcare happening across the country, with many families opting for childminding services instead of centre-based provision. That is why, under the National Action Plan for Childminding, which I launched in 2021, I plan to expand supports further for families by bringing childminders into the scope of regulation and the National Childcare Scheme. This major reform will help support childminders, safeguard children, and ensure that families using childminders can also benefit from the government's efforts to reduce the cost of early learning and childcare.

We also need to make sure that every child who needs an early learning and childcare place can get one. I know that parents, particularly new parents, in some parts of the country have found it challenging to find available places for their children. This is something that, as Minister, I am determined to address.

In 2022, we ensured that that the new funding stream for early learning and childcare providers, Core Funding, incentivised services to expand. We are already seeing the benefits of this, with the number of child place hours available increasing, particularly in areas and for cohorts where they was an undersupply. Core Funding of €259m is a significant new injection of

“EROs set out – for the first time – minimum hourly rates of pay for various roles in the sector, including higher minimum rates for lead educators and managers who are graduates.”

“Under the National Action Plan for Childminding, which I launched in 2021, I plan to expand supports further for families by bringing childminders into the scope of regulation and the National Childcare Scheme.”

funding into the sector, and there is an 11% increase of €28m in the budget for year two of the scheme. Next year the increased Core Funding will allow for further developments and enhancements to the scheme to support services.

For the next year, we intend to continue with reform. January 2023 will see the increase in the NCS come into effect. It will also see the first full year of Core Funding, and I am hopeful that we will continue to see services expand. We also plan to roll out a significant programme of capital investment to support service expansion.

In addition to this, we committed to enhancing and expanding the Access and Inclusion Model, which currently supports more than 5,000 children with a disability to access the ECCE programme each year, and to developing a new Tackling Disadvantage fund, whereby services will be provided with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports to support children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage. The provision of hot meals in early learning and childcare is currently being piloted as one potential support.

We are undertaking wide-ranging reform which will benefit children and families, early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners, and service providers.

We are substantially reducing out-of-pocket costs of early learning and childcare for families; we are ensuring that the supply of early learning and childcare places is meeting demand; we are increasing the pay of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners; and we are placing early learning and childcare providers on a solid, sustainable footing.

I look forward to continuing these reforms next year.

We are increasing the pay of early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners; and we are placing early learning and childcare providers on a solid, sustainable footing.

Voice of the Provider: Post-Covid-19 Practice in Early Childhood Education

Positive changes made in our setting because
of the pandemic



Sinéad White
Owner and Manager of
Little Breeches Preschool
& Montessori, Wexford

This article offers insights into the changes introduced in an early years education setting as a result of Covid-19 and related restrictions. It reflects on the impact of these changes, which include outdoor learning and a strict infectious-disease policy, and describes the positive response from parents and children.

Introduction

After qualifying as a Montessori teacher from St. Nicholas Montessori College, Ireland, in 2009, I started my early years education career in a lovely nursery school in London. I stayed there for five years before returning to Ireland, where I worked as a room leader in the Montessori room in a very busy crèche in Mayo. The opportunity then arose for me to run my own early years setting in my home county of Wexford, where I am now the owner and manager of Little Breeches Preschool & Montessori.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector in Ireland. Having come through this difficult time for early years practitioners, children, and their families, I think many positives have come from the changes that were implemented in all early years education settings across Ireland to help us overcome the global pandemic that we found on our doorstep.

In early 2021, when we were preparing to reopen our setting, many documents and advice were circulated to all providers of early years education in Ireland. These documents, checklists, and forms became the basis for how we would operate upon reopening. They helped guide us in the right direction, so that we could do our utmost to keep the children and their families safe, as well as the practitioners and all staff linked to our setting.

When we reopened in March 2021, did we think we would still be carrying through the changes we implemented now, near the end of 2022? I imagine that most providers would say no, but here we are. A lot of the changes we made have had a very positive impact on our setting, and I believe that many settings would feel the same as we do.

Dealing with staffing issues

Little Breeches Preschool & Montessori is a play-based sessional preschool with strong elements of the Montessori philosophy. It is a warm, supportive, and inclusive environment that strives to allow children to be independent and explore their needs and interests. We place the children at the heart of all we do.

Because of our small setting, we were lucky that 'play pods' were never something we had to explore as a result of the restrictions and guidelines, so we did not have to stress about setting up pods or staffing them. However, as a small setting, we did not have the staff to cover some sessions because of Covid-19. This was the case for many providers, as Covid-19 often spread from staff member to staff member, leaving us with no other option than to close for a day or two, which was very stressful at the time.

But having come through the pandemic, I have learnt not to stress over issues that are out of my control. If I have a staffing issue now, I know that this is okay and if we need to close for a day, that is exactly what we do. Thankfully, we have very understanding parents! A good positive to take from a very testing time.

Embracing outdoor learning

The amazing outdoor area and garden that surrounds us was a lifesaver during the early days of reopening, and we have developed a real appreciation for it. Our outdoor area is vast and contains many beautiful features that

develop a sense of wonder and awe in the children. It also helps them build their investigational, social, and physical skills.

Based on the public health guidelines, we spent most of our sessions outdoors in early 2021. We brought aspects of the indoors out and made the children feel that we had extended our classroom to the outdoors. This is something

we continued even when restrictions were lifted. We spend 75 per cent of our session outside now, much to the children's delight. Their learning and development have become very natural, and their interests and needs have become more obvious to us as practitioners.

As we enter winter, we have found that the children's health has benefitted from the time spent outside. The level of sickness is lower than before Covid-19, and the children's increased energy levels and desire to learn from their exploration are very noticeable. Parents and children have supported this adaptation being continued and are positive about the impact it is making. One parent said:

Having such a fantastic space outdoors and utilising it, especially during the height of the pandemic, made me feel at ease with my child attending and his health and wellbeing being looked after. I thought this

helped with keeping Covid-19 numbers in the setting down and helped to stop the spread of Covid-19. I am still so pleased to see that the setting has continued with this and they spend a large amount of their session outdoors.

Building trust with parents

We have continued to have the children dropped off to the gate, rather than to the inside door, which has benefitted the children's confidence and independence coming into the setting. Under a watchful eye, the children enter the garden independently and enter their session with ease and very little resistance. Parents have spoken about the ease of this transition and the benefits that they see for themselves and their child. One parent said:

It is wonderful how she can enter the garden with such enthusiasm every day. She does not look for help with her bag or reassurance in going in. She adapted to this change with ease, and it has benefitted her overall confidence and self-esteem. It has also made my life much easier, and I do not have to hang around for 10–15 minutes now every morning.

One of the difficulties that all settings faced during the Covid-19 restrictions was how we had to be very observant of the developing symptoms of the virus, and alert to the children's changes during their time with us. Being strict with parents, and having to ask them to collect a child for a symptom that may have been overlooked, was very hard – not only on us, the practitioners, but also on the children and families. But it is something we have continued to monitor closely, and we have continued to implement a strict infectious-disease policy.

“We encouraged parents to book an appointment with us... we discouraged conversations at the gate.”

Has this strict policy reduced the spread of common colds and coughs that children get every winter? Perhaps not, but I feel it has continued to boost the confidence that parents have in us to keep their children safe and healthy while in our setting. It has led to most parents being more vigilant of their child's overall wellbeing now, and they are still cautious when deciding whether to send their child to preschool if they are unwell or displaying any symptoms. We have also continued with our hand hygiene and coughing and sneezing etiquette. This has become second nature to the children, and I think they will be a generation who will never forget how to follow good personal hygiene, especially around others.

When Covid restrictions were in place and social distancing was a major factor, we encouraged parents to book an appointment with us if they wished to speak to us about their child or any issues that may have arisen. Obviously, day-to-day information was passed on to the parent or caregiver, but we discouraged conversations at the gate that may have required more time or attention. We have also continued to adapt and carry through this change in our setting. We have found that it has improved communication

between the practitioners and the parents, and it has helped us to overcome problems seamlessly and comfortably.

Listening to little voices

We asked our group of children whether they could identify what changes we made because of Covid-19 and what they felt were the best changes to our school. The answers included: ‘We cough into our elbow so our friends do not get sick’, ‘We have to wash our hands *all* the time!’, ‘We get to play outside when we come to school’, and ‘I love that we can run down the hill when we come to school.’

We are so grateful that children are resilient, strong, and brave and that they always look to the positives of every situation. We learnt so much from the children in our school when weathering the storm of a pandemic that rocked our country. Simple guidance and flexibility were required when steering them through the changes to our routine and procedures, but by the end, it was the children who steered us in the right direction. They showed us that the changes and adaptations we had made to our school were positive and have made us develop into a stronger setting where the children's wellbeing is the main focus.

Some changes due to COVID identified by the children:

“We cough into our elbow so that our friend won't get sick.”

“We have to wash our hands all the time!”

“We get to play outside when we come to school.”

“I love that we can run down the hill when we come to school.”

Early Years Education Is Political

How the early years sector campaigned successfully for better pay



Deborah Reynolds
Early Years Teacher

This article describes how professionals in the early years education sector campaigned for, and won, a pay deal in 2022, and outlines the efforts that went into winning that deal. It describes the challenges faced and surmounted, how momentum was sustained through the pandemic, and what the future holds for the sector.

The invaluable role childcare plays in the day-to-day lives of thousands of families throughout the country cannot be overstated. Our early years and childcare workers, who care for and educate our children, deserve our support and should be paid a wage appropriate to the responsibilities they carry. —Minister Michael McGrath, Budget 2022 Statement (Oireachtas, 2021a)



Eilish Balfe
Early Years Manager

Authors' note: In this article we use *early years* and *childcare* interchangeably in referring to our sector. *Early years* is the term the sector has adopted informally, and *childcare* is the common term by which many people know us. *Early Childhood Care and Education* is the internationally recognised name. *Early Learning and Care* is the moniker put on us by the Department of Children in an unpopular policy move. Workers in the sector are referred to here as early years professionals (EYPs).

Early years needed to get political

If you search for 'childcare' in the debate archive of Dáil Éireann, you'll find it mentioned just 22 times during the 1980s; and only around 2,520 times from 1980 to 2015, a 35-year span. The seven years from 2015 to 2022 saw it mentioned 2,705 times (Oireachtas, 2022). This is relevant because childcare needed to get political to make change happen, so that's what EYPs have done. Through the Big Start campaign of our trade union, SIPTU (Big Start, 2022), we have placed early years firmly in the political domain, accelerating ongoing positive change that will secure a brighter future for our previously overlooked and underappreciated sector.

The sector's fragmented nature, low pay, and high turnover were documented by a White Paper decades ago (DES, 1999), but successive governments made no effort to improve pay and conditions in the

years up to 2022. During the 2010s, Marian Quinn and the Association of Childhood Professionals started a grassroots movement to highlight the need for change by setting up a professional association and holding protests. Progressive research commissioned by the National Childhood Network (NCN) and Crann started valuable discussions on the pay rates that EYPs should be getting (Duncan & Thomas, 2018).

Only when SIPTU launched the Big Start campaign in 2016 did early years truly start to develop our voice politically. It was then that change became possible through nationwide activism, the success of which is clearly shown by a 430% average increase in political coverage of 'childcare' in Dáil Éireann over the past seven years (Oireachtas, 2022).

How did early years become political?

EYPs, with support from our trade union, began to speak to our local representatives. We lobbied the government with 'A New Deal for Early Years' (Big Start, 2021). We developed our media and social media skills, explaining to the public and our peers what needed to be done to improve our working lives (Heaney, 2020; RTÉ News, 2021). We explained the real-life experiences of EYPs through surveys, and we explained the troubling reality of working in early years in a presentation to the DCEDIY Oireachtas Joint Committee in October 2021 (Oireachtas, 2021b). In February 2020 we protested with the Together for Early Years coalition (SIPTU, 2020) in one of the largest ever protests on the streets of Dublin (Ní Aodha, 2020), and we built membership of our trade union to fight for a hopeful future for our sector.

Key political actions and documents had a significant effect on EYPs' progression towards better pay and conditions. The annual Pobal sector profile reports have provided an invaluable resource on what the early years sector has looked like since 2012, documenting that low pay and high turnover are distinguishing and interdependent features of the sector (Pobal, 2022a).

A 2017 report on the sector's working conditions by the DCYA Oireachtas Joint Committee (2017) incorporated the voices of early years activists and painted a bleak but honest picture. Subsequently Kathleen Funchion TD proposed in the Dáil that EYPs' pay and conditions needed to improve through investment; the motion was passed unopposed (Oireachtas, 2017). Minister Katherine Zappone followed with encouraging words, stating that if she were a childcare worker she 'would join a union' (Zappone, 2017). Politics was finally waking up to EYPs' determination to create change.

Some key policy actions were taken in 2019. The government launched the First 5 document (DCYA, 2019a), which aims among other goals to raise the professional status of early years, support employers to offer better working conditions, and support the attraction and retention of staff.

“Childcare needed to get political to make change happen, so that's what Early Years Professionals (EYPs) have done.”

One of its goals was to establish a workforce development plan and a new funding model. In 2019 Minister Zappone launched a funding model expert group and a workforce development plan steering group to progress this (DCYA, 2019b).

Challenges along the way

2020 began powerfully for EYPs. SIPTU played a pivotal role in the Together for Early Years coalition (SIPTU, 2020), whose protest on the streets of Dublin on 5 February saw 30,000 EYPs and supporters demand better pay and conditions for the sector. The protest cemented public support. Unfortunately, the forward motion was put on pause when the Covid-19 pandemic closed schools and early years services in March (RTÉ News, 2020).

Despite the cruelty of the pandemic, it did highlight the care economy internationally, and crucially it underscored the role that the early years sector plays in the care and education of children. It also spotlighted the sector's key role in the economy, by allowing parents of young children to go to work. There was a lot of investment during the pandemic, with the annual equivalent of over €1 billion put into our sector (DCEDIY, 2022a), 80% of wages paid through the wage subsidy scheme (Oireachtas, 2021c), and extensive grants provided for reopening, outdoor play, and personal protective equipment. That extra funding, along with all the regular income streams from parents, the National Childcare Scheme, and the ECCE scheme, kept early years afloat when other businesses were experiencing challenges.

“Despite the cruelty of the pandemic, it underscored the role that the early years sector plays in the care and education of children.”

Despite this investment, EYPs' wages remained low. The annual Pobal report indicated that the average wage for early years assistants, who make up 50% of the sector, was €12.10 an hour (Pobal, 2022b). Further evidence that EYPs were struggling is seen in a Back to Work survey, which highlighted that 84% of EYPs couldn't cope with unexpected expenses and 61% found it difficult to make ends meet (Big Start, 2020).

Time for change

Our sector was hugely disappointed in October 2020 when EYPs got no mention in the Budget 2021 statement (Government of Ireland, 2020). EYPs turned this disappointment into continued activism in 2021, when their political pressure finally paid off.

Firstly, the government put a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for early years in its Programme for Government (Irish Government, 2020). Secondly, Minister O'Gorman expedited the work of both research groups. The Workforce Development Plan steering group published Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY, 2021a), which sets out its goals of having a valued workforce in a competent early years system. Concurrently the expert group on the

funding model published a document called Partnership for Public Good (DCEDIY, 2021b), which lays out recommendations for new types of funding, support for the JLC, and recommendations for parent fee management.

Thirdly, the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality made significant recommendations for early years, such as: to plan for public provision of childcare, to increase investment, and to improve pay and develop a career structure for the sector (Citizens' Assembly, 2021). Finally, we received a historic amount of investment from Budget 2022 of €221 million in core funding. €138 million was intended 'first and foremost' for EYPs' pay and conditions, with a further €38 million for an expanded graduate uplift fund. That budget statement was the first to refer to EYPs by name – a very significant political recognition (Oireachtas, 2021a).

A key part of Partnership for Public Good is core funding. Phase 1 of core funding was adopted as government policy, to be rolled out in 2022. Core funding is specific to each early years service, it depends on capacity for children and opening hours, and it requires services to freeze their fees. Core funding channels money towards staff pay and conditions, and the drawing down of core funding in 2022 was contingent on Employment Regulation Order (ERO) pay rates being developed for the entire sector (DCEDIY, 2022b).

How the sector got better pay

A Joint Labour Committee is a method for collective bargaining for an entire sector that is laid out in Irish law (Irish Government, 1990). Collective bargaining refers to negotiations between employees and employer(s) on pay and working conditions. An online pre-JLC process was initiated in December 2020 by Minister Roderic O'Gorman. It was chaired by Kevin Duffy and was asked to consider whether a JLC was appropriate for our sector. The chair's report in February 2021 (Oireachtas, 2021d) recommended to the Minister that a JLC be established. In June an Establishment Order was put in place by Minister Damien English, requesting that the Labour Court establish a JLC (Irish Government, 2021).

“The Early Childhood sector received a historic amount of investment from Budget 2022 of €221 million in core funding.”

JLC committee nominations were sent to the Labour Court, six members on the employees' side and six on the employer's, along with an independent chair and deputy chair. Negotiations in line with the statutory JLC process began in December 2021 and continued until August 2022. They combined online and in-person meetings, and negotiations were lengthy. It was the first JLC to seek a recommendation from the Labour Court under section 42B(4) of the Industrial Relations Act (Irish Government, 1990) during the JLC process, not once but twice. Recommendations LCR22575 and LCR22586 give an insight into how far apart the two sides were in our vision for pay in the sector and for the future of its workforce (Labour Court, 2022a; 2022b).

Despite the challenges and delays of the JLC negotiations, two EROs for the sector were written into law by Minister English on 15 September 2022. An ERO is a legally binding document setting out minimum rates of pay and possibly conditions for various defined roles in a sector. ERO 1 contains a statutory minimum rate of pay for early years educators of €13.00 (DETE, 2022a), and ERO 2 contains statutory minimum rates of pay for lead educators, deputy managers, and managers of €14.00, €15.70, and €16.50, respectively, along with two higher rates of pay for graduate lead educators and graduate managers of €15.50 and €17.25 (DETE, 2022b).

The EROs make particular reference to payment of wages: that all educators and managers should receive payment for all hours worked, all contact and non-contact time. This is especially relevant given that a recent survey found that 68% of EYPs regularly do unpaid work (Big Start, 2021). This is backed up by a Pobal report which states that 60% of EYPs do not have non-contact time (Pobal, 2022b) It's vital that all EYPs understand that they should be paid for all hours worked each week.

Future for early years

There is a palpable sense that change is happening in the Irish early years sector in 2022. Around 20,000 EYPs have received a pay increase, many of whom thought it was impossible (DCEDIY, 2022a) – but early years trade union activists around Ireland knew it was possible. All of the stars seemed to align for EYPs this year through government policy and investment, though some of those stars were dragged into place by activists.

There was another hopeful Budget statement in September 2022 (Irish Government, 2022), which saw investment in early years increase to over €1 billion a year – five years ahead of schedule for the DCEDIY. Much of the additional funding is intended to reduce fees for parents, but core funding for pay has been increased by €59 million.

Jim Larkin, one of the founders and leaders of Irish trade unionism in the early 20th century, coined the phrase 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. This year has brought about a solid foundation for EYPs' pay through both EROs. But we need more investment, and we need to see year-on-year increases to our pay until we receive the fair day's pay that we deserve. Early years has become political, and there is no looking back.

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There is a palpable sense that change is happening in the Irish early years sector in 2022.

'This Machine Cleans the Air' – Early Childhood STEM in Ireland

A look at current policy and inspiring practices

This article examines some of Ireland's current early childhood STEM policies and practices, focusing on two examples of settings where exemplary STEM practices were seen to be already taking place. Such illustrations can provide inspiration to other settings and show that the current early childhood STEM policy aspirations are well founded. Timely implementation of these policies could see exciting times ahead for early childhood STEM practice in Ireland.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that young children are both interested in and capable of engaging in STEM learning (Patrick & Mantzicopoulos, 2015; McCormick Smith & Chao, 2018). Research has also indicated that supporting young children's STEM learning in early childhood education (ECE) settings can improve their educational outcomes long-term, in both STEM and other subjects (Schoenfeld & Stipek, 2011; Morgan et al., 2016). Government educational policies and curriculums, recognising the developmental potential of early STEM learning, often recommend that STEM learning opportunities be provided for children in ECE settings (DES, 2017a; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).

In Ireland, the STEM Education Policy Statement (DES, 2017a) recognised the importance of giving children opportunities to engage in STEM learning from early childhood. The STEM Education Implementation Plan (DES, 2017b) indicated that an evidence-based model of STEM practice in ECE settings would be developed. Although the Covid-19 pandemic delayed progress, the National Council for Curriculum Assessment's (NCCA) Aistear Síolta Practice Guide has been updated to include guidance on STEM teaching and learning in ECE settings, a welcome addition for ECE educators (NCCA, 2020).

However, many ECE educators, who have had little or no training in STEM pedagogy or practice, continue to lack the skills, knowledge, and confidence to successfully implement STEM learning for young children in their settings (DES, 2020a; DES, 2020b). The DES Guide to Early Years Education Inspection, reflecting the aims of the STEM Education Policy Statement, seeks evidence that 'children have



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opportunities to engage with activities that build early positive dispositions' towards STEAM (DES, 2018, p.22).

The Department's report on practice in ECE settings indicated that STEM learning achievements and STEM teaching were 'less than satisfactory' in 28% of the lessons observed (DES, 2020b, p.14). Lack of knowledge around age-appropriate digital learning and government STEM education policy were also apparent in reports (DES, 2020a, 2020b). It was acknowledged, however, that further supports were necessary for ECE settings to progress in the area of STEM (DES, 2020b).

Despite delays to appropriate supports for ECE settings to progress STEM learning for young children, there are examples of high-quality STEM practices in ECE settings across Ireland. These settings lean into Aistear's model of inquiry-based learning in an emergent and play-based curriculum, to build positive learning dispositions such as curiosity, investigation, and creativity (NCCA, 2009). During inspections in such settings, children were seen to be engaging in 'activities that fostered creativity and critical thinking skills . . . enabl[ing them] to be natural discoverers, inquirers, engineers and explorers' (DES, 2020b, p.14).

Excellent STEM practice in ECE settings

We have seen examples of excellent STEM practice in such ECE settings. Below, we describe practices we have observed and offer brief commentary on the features that contributed to our excitement at witnessing them.

In one ECE setting, Hamsa saw initial examples of young children's interest in the idea of electricity. The educator mentioned that one child, waving a piece of wire, had said: 'It's electric.' The educator had noted this, and said to Hamsa that she was going to wait for other children to pick up on the idea, before following up on it with the group. Her patience was rewarded: a few weeks later, examples of this child and another child's model-making related to electricity. Her records and interpretations of these two children's talk about their models are as follows:

Four-year-old child's words about his machine: 'This machine cleans the air. The wire is the electricity, and it brings the air down into the machine. The blue and pink bits are where the air is cleaned – it goes around. Then the clean air comes out of the cork. The gold beads are the buttons to make it work.'



'The Stinger Pupper Machine'
(child aged 3.5)

Extract from learning journal:

You started to combine the wire with the clay, and when I commented on how you had made the wire 'stand up really tall', you explained that it was a 'Stinger Pupper Machine'. You then proceeded to tell me that 'when I put lightning in it, that makes it sting. The lightning comes from the cloud, and it goes inside the wire and then the wire stings.'

From this event you demonstrated your ability to use the clay and wire to create a product, and when considering what your creation could be you drew on your knowledge of lightning and its ability to 'sting' you. You also had knowledge of how electricity is conducted.

Subsequently, several children started drawing pictures of electricity, and decided to build a model electric car charger in their talk in a game about traffic, and drew pictures of electricity. The educator noted at this point that she had purchased an electric circuit to show them how electricity is conducted and a kit to show them how the energy stored in a potato can be used to power a clock.

What is marked for us is this educator's knowledge base and pedagogic skill. She noticed fragments in children's flow of talk that were important markers of their current interests and frames of reference, and these could be linked to important strands of science and the technologies linked with designing and making. This kind of 'noticing' skill has been extensively described as a key marker of skilled pedagogy (Jacobs et al., 2010).

The educator was also patient enough to wait for interest to spread organically beyond a single child, before offering conversations and activities for children to engage with that could take their ideas forward, while also having a sense of 'suitable conversations' – conversations that could build a thread from children's interests and understandings towards the disciplinary understandings that would be recognised by scientists.

These threads often take years to develop, but we were fortunate enough to access teaching that exemplified important parts of this trajectory in the work of this teacher. And across this work, the approach was learner-centred and play-based, while also attuned to the forward trajectories of scientific and technological ways of thinking, concepts, and ideas.

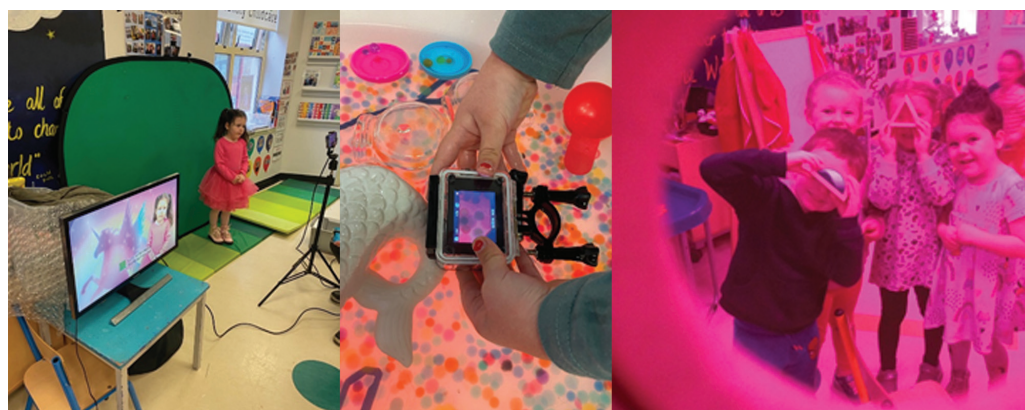
Part of our work as teacher educators and policymakers is to make illustrations of these kinds of shorter-term trajectories more available for ECE educators, who may be a little less confident about what to do when children express ideas that appear to have STEM-related possibilities. These trajectories are not always easy to capture in the course of children's play-based learning, where the timelines of individual and small-group learning

have little in the way of pre-defined schedules. But the illustration above shows what is possible in the hands of a skilful and engaged ECE educator.

In another setting, staff reflected on the benefits of technology use in their setting during the pandemic, particularly the use of Zoom for remote visits to their local nursing home or for children who had to stay home. This prompted a move towards 'teaching the children about mindful usage and the joys technology could bring' while a technology vision statement was developed with families. Trust in the children's capabilities with technology led to the development of skills such as leadership, creativity, and communication:

The first real introduction was the camera on the iPad. Instead of the teachers taking the pictures, the children started to take the pictures, with amazing results. When the teachers took the pictures, not all the children would be relaxed in them, but when their friends took photos, children were relaxed, making faces and really showing off. It was also lovely to see the educators in the pictures.

Children did picture collages, emailing their photos to the computer for printing and sticking them into their own journal, so they became leaders of their own learning from start to finish. This evolved into the use of a green screen and even underwater cameras. It was truly amazing to watch them grow in confidence with the cameras.



Over time, the setting added more technology, including walkie-talkies to talk through the window to their friends in the local nursing home, iPads with different apps, digital weighing scales and calculators, a coding mouse called EARL, a digital microscope, a light table, and an outdoor programmable Rugged Robot. The children's innovative use of technology even allowed them to act as active citizens and educators in their local community:

The email also became a huge part of the curriculum. We emailed Meath County Council to tell them about the broken traffic lights in the village. When they were fixed after three days and an email came back to say

thank you, the children were delighted and it highlighted their active citizenship role in their community for them.



When we finally got back down to our local nursing home for in-person visits, the children chose to bring down the Rugged Robot and the digital microscope. It was lovely to watch them teach Albert, who was 96, how to use the Rugged Robot, and laughter erupted as they used the digital microscope on John's bald head, to see if they could find any hair follicles. We also met Richard, an adult with Down's Syndrome, who used an iPad to communicate – this clearly showed the children and the parents that technology could be an amazing tool.

The introduction of technology into this setting, which emerged from the educators' reflective practice (Schön, 1991), resulted in improvements to both curriculum and pedagogy:

We embraced technology with both hands in our early years service, and I am so glad we did. It has truly added to the children's learning and increased their engagement. When we identify a learning opportunity, technology has allowed us to enhance that learning. The educators in the classroom are learning too, with all of our new teaching materials.

Conclusion

It is the kind of work that we see in these two settings that we find particularly exciting in the directions of the Irish ECE policy commitment to STEM education, and that we hope to engage more with in the next few years.

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Better Start Access and Inclusion Model

This article explores how Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has demonstrated flexibility in the delivery of universal and targeted supports under level 4, Early Years Educational Advice and Mentoring.



Delia Goodman
Better Start National Manager

Introduction

In 2015 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) set up an interdepartmental group to agree a model to support the participation and inclusion of children with a disability into the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. This model was innovative, as it brought together several different government departments and agencies to work on the same vision.

While the group 'acknowledges the huge benefits to children with disabilities of attending mainstream pre-schools, it also recognises that a small number of children will continue to require specialist pre-school services due to very complex needs arising from their disability' (DCYA, 2015, p.5). It agreed a model of supports to develop the capacity of the sector over a three-year period. This model would include universal supports and more targeted supports for children with complex needs arising from a disability (ibid.).

The model (Figure 1) was developed from a strengths-based perspective. It is based on the strengths and abilities of a child with a disability and does not focus on their diagnosis. Nor does a child require a diagnosis to avail of supports under this model, because it is recognised that many children may not have a formal diagnosis by the time they attend preschool (ibid.).

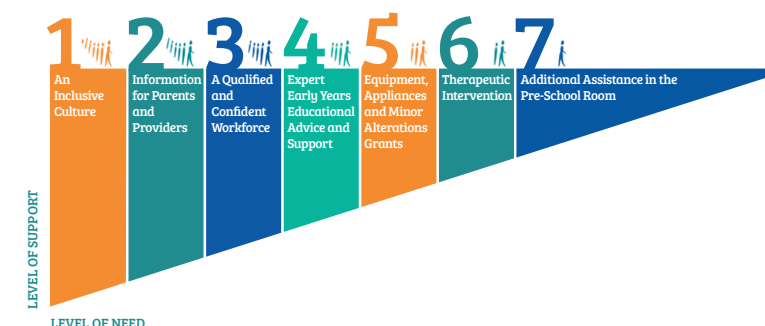


Figure 1. The Access and Inclusion Model: seven levels of universal and targeted supports

The role of Better Start AIM

Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides universal and targeted supports based on the model (levels 3, 4, 6, 7), to help individual children with disabilities to access their local preschool and participate meaningfully in the free preschool (ECCE) programme. A national team of AIM early years specialists (EYSs) provide expert educational advice and mentoring to early years educators under level 4 of the model (Expert Early Years Educational Advice and Support).

The EYSs work with early years educators to build their capacity and confidence to aid a child's active participation in an ECCE setting. Early years specialists, in partnership with early years educators, use the national early childhood frameworks of Siolta and Aistear to develop specific strategies (universal or targeted) and 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 educators to reflect on their practice to enhance what they already know and do.

Better Start's mentoring model (Figure 2) is defined as:

a supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist. This relationship is based on the values of respect, openness, and a commitment of both parties to quality early learning and care experiences for children. The process is reflective, strengths-based and tailored to the individual context of each early years setting.

This provides opportunities for lasting change. The flexibility of this model of mentoring gives early years educators the opportunity to reflect on their own practice. In doing this it can open new possibilities and expand and enhance skills, as noted by Vivien Whitaker (2009, pp.100–101): 'creative methods (in mentoring and coaching) tend to open new possibilities and encourage expansive mode of thinking'.

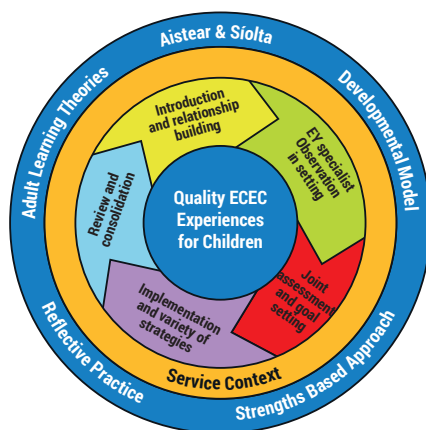


Figure 2: Visual representation of Better Start mentoring model

Expansion of AIM

The AIM programme has grown significantly, from supporting over 2,000 children in 2016 to over 5,000 children currently (Figure 3). Applications for AIM came in steadily at first, and over the years the numbers have increased. This can be attributed to more awareness of the model and the value of quality inclusive practice to support children and families. This growth has meant an increase in the numbers of Better Start EYSs to ensure the provision of educational advice and mentoring to educators.

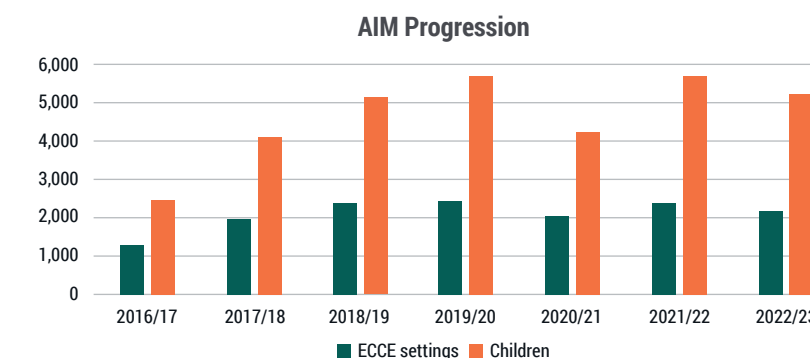


Figure 3: The number of children and ECCE settings availing of AIM from 2016 to the current year

As the ECCE landscape has developed, the AIM programme has continued to adapt how universal and targeted strategies are implemented. In 2018 the Better Start Early Years Learning and Development Unit was launched, tasked with coordinating agreed continuous professional development (CPD) under level 3 of the model, and providing a programme of training to ECCE service providers and early years educators to build their skills and knowledge about disability and inclusion.

Early years specialists, as part of AIM level 3, deliver Hanen Teacher Talk training to early years educators (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). Educators learn practical, interactive strategies to help children interact and communicate during everyday preschool activities. In 2020, with a global pandemic and health restrictions in place, the Better Start model of mentoring was adapted to offer blended mentoring, using online methods of communication such as emails and video calls, and face-to-face meetings. This enabled EYSs to continue to provide mentoring supports during restrictions, with Hanen Teacher Talk being able to move to online delivery.

Using blended mentoring has changed how an observation can be conducted to identify the needs of a child and ascertain the level of AIM support required. A service observation review (SOR) was developed to help early years educators observe a child using the Access and Inclusion Profile while face-to-face visits were limited.¹ With health restrictions now lifted, the SOR and blended mentoring methods will continue, allowing EYSs to

cut down on wait times due to availability of the service provider or EYS, and enabling them to manage the number of applications for AIM more efficiently.

Figure 3 shows the programme continuing to grow, with a 25% increase in applications for level 4 compared to the end of September 2021. What was not anticipated was the number of multiple applications received from individual settings. This has led to the development of a working group, who have identified ways that level 4 expert educational advice and mentoring can be provided to these settings.

This involves bringing settings together to provide input on universal resources to support a child's access and participation in preschool. These resources include Visual Schedules, First/Then, and Choice Boards, as well as promoting a Key Person approach and the role of an inclusion coordinator (INCO) in the development of My Inclusion Plan.²

AIM EYSs are currently piloting the use of these resources through the delivery of workshops either online or face to face. The pilot is in its early stages, and a review will take place at the end of 2022. Feedback from attendees and from EYSs delivering the pilot is positive. Describing what is working well, one EYS noted in an internal survey:

Bringing everyone together and discussing the importance of a consistent approach (visuals).

From workshops on My Inclusion Plan, early years educators said they had 'a greater understanding of it' and 'more clarity on the AIM model and the role of the INCO' (EYS internal survey response).

Conclusion

Since the development of the Access and Inclusion Model, Better Start AIM has shown flexibility in adapting and enhancing the delivery of mentoring and coaching to early years educators based on the changing needs of the ECCE programme, while continuing to respond to the high levels of AIM applications.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is committed to the review and evaluation of AIM. An end-of-three-year evaluation took place in 2021, commissioned to seek the views of children, parents, ECCE providers, and stakeholder organisations on the model, and to examine the wider impacts of AIM. The findings will inform the continuous implementation and possible expansion of AIM. We await the evaluation results and look forward to the future developments of AIM.

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ENDNOTES

1. An Access and Inclusion Profile is jointly completed by the service provider and parent. It is used to ascertain a child's abilities and needs to enable them to access and participate in the ECCE programme.
2. My Inclusion Plan is a resource for early years educators to plan for a child's inclusion in their ECCE setting, in partnership with the child's parent/guardian or carer and relevant professional working with the child.

Better Start's mentoring model is defined as a supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist.



The Power of Play in Times of Crisis



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This article explores the importance of play in the lives of children experiencing adversity, particularly forced migration due to war, conflict, or disaster. The authors draw on recent literature in this area as well as first-hand experience of facilitating an open-access play space for children and their families fleeing conflict.

Birds fly, fish swim, children play (Landreth, 2002)

Play is a voluntary, intrinsically motivated, child-directed activity involving flexibility of choice in determining how an item is used. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises play as a fundamental right of childhood. In our professional and personal lives, we see children around us play every day. Children play at home, in their neighbourhoods, in their early learning care setting, and in school; they play indoors and outdoors, alone and with others. They play with toys, real-life and natural objects, or no materials at all (NCCA, 2009).

Play is the means through which children learn about and create their social world. Children create (rather than being taught) learning experiences through four different types of play: mastery play, through which children construct concepts and develop skills; innovative play, where children expand and vary the concepts and skills they have mastered; kinship play, through which children enter the world of peer relations; and therapeutic play, which gives children strategies for dealing with stressful life events.

Whatever the reason for play or the type of play, we know that play is a biological and social need, a right, and one of the most beneficial activities for a child's overall health. Landreth (2002, p.10) describes play as 'the singular central activity of childhood, occurring at all times and in all places'.

Children's right to play in times of crisis

But what happens when play is disrupted in times of crisis, such as when fleeing war, conflict, or natural or human-made disasters? When living spaces become unsafe, play becomes secondary to the needs for safety, shelter, food, and medicine, and so children's need and right to play are undermined (UNCRC, 2013; Feldman, 2019), despite the fact that play is known to be crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival in these circumstances (Chatterjee, 2017).

Exposure to violence or disaster, the loss of a sense of place and security of home and all the connected services and social networks, and deterioration in living conditions all have immediate as well as long-term consequences for the balance, development and fulfilment of children, families and communities. (ARC Resource Pack, 2009, cited in Chatterjee, 2017, p.13)

The impact of conflicts and their aftermath on children's play can last an entire childhood (Frey-Wouters, 1997, cited in Feldman, 2019). In many situations of crisis and armed conflict, children's play is one of the first things to be curtailed, both indoors and outdoors, as concerns about immediate or threatened safety take priority (Feldman, 2019).

Yet, for children fleeing conflict, war, or disaster, the provision of play can perform a 'significant therapeutic and rehabilitative role in helping children recover a sense of normality and joy after experiencing loss, dislocation and trauma' (Chatterjee, 2017, p.44). The UNCRC acknowledges, 'Children have a spontaneous urge to play and participate in recreational activities and will seek out opportunities to do so in the most unfavourable environments' (2013, p.10).

The war in Ukraine, and conflict and disaster in many other countries, have led to a huge increase in forced migration and displacement. As part of its emergency humanitarian response in March 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth set up an emergency transit hub for refugees arriving to Ireland from Ukraine and other countries.

By the end of July, over 40,000 Ukrainian refugees had fled to Ireland, 30% of them under the age of 14 (CSO, 2022).

“ Play is a biological and social need, a right, and one of the most beneficial activities for a child's overall health. ”

A children's play space was considered an essential element of the wider set of food, shelter, health, child welfare, and accommodation services provided in the transit hub. Bürgin et al. (2002) tell us that for these children it is important to 'build back some normal in the abnormal', rebuilding daily structures and routines, to provide safe places for children to play and to have the opportunity to regulate emotions.

The play area provides a reassuring space where children and their families could be welcomed, where children feel secure to play and their parents and carers can see a glimpse of 'normal in the abnormal'. It recognises the psychosocial value of play for children exposed to conflict and loss, while vindicating children's right to play. While acknowledging the very real struggles of refugee children, Ardelean (2021, p.355) argues:

They are first and foremost children, which means they have a lust to play, possess an incredible ability to adapt to new conditions, and the capacity to find beauty and playfulness in everyday life, regardless of what that might look like from the outside.

In the transit play space, children's urge to play was very evident. When they saw the space with its array of familiar materials, they immediately

took ownership and began to play. Sometimes even with their coat still on or with a bag in one hand, they started to explore, adapt, construct, collaborate, improvise, and create.

Freedom to play through free play

Research on access to play in crisis situations in six jurisdictions found that play allowed children to regain and retain normality under the most difficult and challenging living conditions (Chatterjee, 2017). It identified three key components that enabled children's access to and participation in play:

- supportive adults
- spaces with rich environmental affordances
- fewer restrictions on children's time.

Elkind (2007, p.218) notes that 'the memory of playful experiences, as well as the play experience itself, can reduce stress and provide comfort and reassurance'. Freely chosen play allows children to decide on and control their play, based on their interests, imagination, and initiative. These components informed the provision of an open-access, multi-age play space where children of all ages, from multiple countries and backgrounds, found a welcoming and recognisable 'children's place'.

Unstructured play is unplanned, imaginative, sometimes purposeless, and completely led, putting children in the driving seat and giving them control over what and who they play with.

Unstructured play is unplanned, imaginative, sometimes purposeless, and completely *child-led*, putting children in the driving seat and giving them control over what and who they play with (Lawlor, 2021). This is an important benefit of play for all children, even more so for children where so many aspects of their lives have been taken out of their control. Child-led play recognises children's essential agency. As they play, children rearrange their worlds to make them less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith, 1999).

The link between play and self-regulation is supported by neuroscience research. Child-led play produces dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with a sense of well-being that reduces levels of stress (Ziegler, 2021). Liu et al. (2017) identify five characteristics of playful experience: joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive. They found that each characteristic is associated with stress regulation.

In the transitory play space, children spend their time creating socio-dramatic scenarios, enacting familiar rituals such as making meals, and playing restaurant. They are seen using small-world play, constructing buildings and creating farmyards and elaborate railways. Some delight in the sensory comfort of play-dough and create artwork, often signifying a sense of belonging, with symbols, flags, and people. Some find a playmate (whether with a shared or different language) to challenge in a game of Ludo or Uno, while others get lost in The Floor is Lava or in universally ubiquitous ball games.

Whatever the play, the players know that 'this is play', hence providing a safe place where emotions can be experienced without the consequences they might bring in the 'real' world (Lester and Russell, 2010). Regardless of how they choose to spend their time, it is their choice and their time.

Conclusion

While the devastating effects of conflict and forced displacement on children can spread across generations, play has the potential to counteract those effects and support children's recovery and resilience (Feldman, 2019). Putting into perspective what we know about child development, children's rights to play (Article 31) and participate (Article 12), and the elements of quality provision of play, we can provide positive experiences for children coming to our country, our communities, schools, and ELC settings, giving them the opportunity, dignity, and joy they deserve.

By providing a playful environment, with supportive adults, and time for freely chosen, child-led play, and having meaningful consultation with children and families, we can provide environments where families feel supported and where children can be children, smile, make friends, and play anyway.

'The sky's awake so I'm awake and I have to play' —Princess Anna from Disney's Frozen

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While the devastating effects of conflict and forced displacement on children can spread across generations, play has the potential to counteract those effects and support children's recovery and resilience.

(Feldman, 2019)

The Tiddly Diddly Outdoor Board

An award-winning, interactive design for creative play

The Tiddly Diddly board is a two-sided board that aims to encourage children to spend more time outdoors, taking initiative and using their imagination. The idea was designed and entered for the SPARK Social Enterprise Awards. It was inspired by the need for more traditionally indoor board games to be used outdoors by children.

The appeal of outdoors

Children should be excited to go outside, no matter the weather, knowing they have the joy of self-expression and the options that the Tiddly Diddly board provides. To enjoy the natural roof of the beautiful skies with their droplets of endless water fun or the bright warm rays of the sun, carpeted by the beautiful plush natural green grass or perhaps the whiff of earthly coloured ground to which our feet are accustomed. Stretching out their arms in the endless space with no boundaries, breathing in and out nature's gift of life.

Inspiration for the Tiddly Diddly board

The Tiddly Diddly outdoor board is a two-sided board that consists of a building-block section and a magnetic-chip section. The idea behind it is to encourage children to spend more time outdoors using their initiative and taking ownership of their play. Most of the outdoor spaces created for children are designed with equipment that is quite rigid and does not provide enough scope for imagination. The board is adaptable and durable and promotes optimal development across all the domains of children's developmental milestones (NCCA, 2009; CECDE, 2007).

Creativity is not univocal, and so the idea of an outdoor board to provide options for children was born out of the necessity for continuity of play indoors and out. Having spent a year in an autism unit during placement, I noticed that some of the children did not like spending time outdoors – perhaps due to their sensory processing disorders or their desire for continuity with their indoor play; going outdoors then meant they would have to halt what they were playing with.

One day, for example, a child who loved playing with jigsaw puzzles had not finished their puzzle before break time and so was hesitant to play outdoors, knowing they did not have the option of outdoor equipment



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with puzzles. Well, I thought that if they knew they could continue their chosen activity outside, irrespective of what they were playing with at the time, they would love the alternative of the outdoor space – knowing that it could be sustained.

And so the aim of trying to create such an interactive board was born. Creating a diversified board that could be used outdoors to provide endless fun for children became an objective for me.

Outdoor space and time

A lot of children, teenagers, and even adults get bored when they are not occupied with an activity that interests them. Two of the main activities that children of any age, ability, and capabilities enjoy are playing with puzzles and building blocks. But these activities are mostly confined to indoor areas, which creates restrictions when children need to play outdoors.

Through my observations and curiosity, I noticed that most outdoor play areas did not provide spaces that encouraged children to play with indoor board games outdoors. A lot of fights and bullying happen in school yards because children are left to run around and sometimes, out of boredom, use their imaginations in ways that might not be very productive.

The Tiddly Diddy board was to provide a space where children could build and create stories using puzzle pieces, building blocks, and other games that are traditionally considered indoor games. There was a need to encourage more indoor games outdoors, because research indicates that children do not engage in outdoor activities as much as they should (Dietz and Gortmaker, 2001).

Children not spending enough time outside has had negative impacts on their health and mental wellbeing, leading to an increase in childhood obesity and other health challenges that can be curbed with more outdoor interactive games (ibid.; Greene et al., 2010). Outdoor play is necessary to support children's optimal development, upon which a wholesome independent adult is predicated.

Uses and objectives of the board

The core objective of designing the Tiddly Diddy board was to support children's outdoor play by creating materials that could be used seamlessly both indoors and outdoors. Creating the board was also intended to help educators pay great attention when designing educational facilities (Bilton, 2014). When a child knows that they can pack up a bag of traditional indoor games activities, such as building blocks or puzzles, and bring them outdoors, they would be encouraged to spend more time engaging with

“Outdoor play is necessary to support children's optimal development, upon which a wholesome independent adult is predicated.”

“The Tiddly Diddy board is very different and innovative because it is designed to serve the needs of both neurotypical and neurodivergent children.”

these resources outdoors. Creating stories and taking ownership of their play fosters confidence and independence in children (NCCA, 2009).

The board is divided into two sections: a section with base plates for building blocks, and a magnetic chip section for creating puzzle pictures, magnetic letters and numbers for literacy and numeracy skills, match the buttons, and shape sorters. Most parks, back gardens, and school playgrounds provide play areas and equipment that are mostly rigid. When a child plays on a climbing frame, for example, it is about sliding and swinging, which does not usually keep their attention for long, because it becomes monotonous. Open-ended materials like building blocks can only be impeded by the imagination of the child. They can be extended as much as possible in play while fostering the creativity and imagination of the child.

It is important to foster creativity and imagination from the early years, because the critical period of plasticity of the brain applies not only to injuries or developmental disorders but also to the environment and social factors that the child experiences (Fox et al., 2010). Research suggests that the part of the brain that sends negative messages becomes less active when a child is provided with materials that they enjoy playing with and that are adaptable to the directions they want their play to take.

To assuage my curiosity about the need for this kind of interactive outdoor board, I visited community playgrounds, preschools, and other privately owned play centres. I realised that there were no designated areas for building blocks or puzzles, which children love to do.

Creating a prototype

A bit of research introduced me to magnet boards created by Ikea that could be used indoors. I also discovered homemade building-block boards on the internet that had been designed by parents for their children. Having checked popular toy shops (in person and online) and finding no outdoor dual board, I designed one.

The Tiddly Diddy board is very different and innovative because it is designed to serve the needs of both neurotypical and neurodivergent children. If tested and approved for outdoor spaces, it would be very beneficial. The board is universal: for example, it can be used by a child in a wheelchair by just pulling themselves against the board with minimal support.

It is simple to use, does not require any expertise, and in Ireland can be linked effortlessly to the curriculum (Aistear) and quality frameworks (Siolta). It is affordable, adaptable, and simple, and it supports the developmental milestones of children. These qualities were the main reasons that the Tiddly Diddy board was picked as the winning idea for the SPARK competition regionally.

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The core objective of designing the Tiddly Diddly board was to support children's outdoor play by creating materials that could be used seamlessly both indoors and outdoors.

Partnership between Families and ECEC services in the Post-Covid Era

Parents' experiences of reconnecting in the past two years

What were parents' experiences of partnership with Early Childhood Education and Care services during the Covid-19 restrictions? How did services maintain a partnership approach, or did it cease to exist when they were advised by government not to let parents enter the premises? This article gives an insight into what parents' experiences were and offers ideas on how ECEC services can reconnect effectively with parents in the post-Covid era.



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Manager of Creative Kids Preschool and School Age Service

Introduction

Partnership with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services is important for families. The national framework for quality in ECEC, *Siolta*, standard 3, says that having successful and meaningful engagement with parents is fundamental to successful participation and learning outcomes for children (CECDE, 2006).

This article explores the impact of Covid-19, the public health measures imposed on ECEC services, and how these might affect partnerships with families if services do not make a concerted effort to reconnect. It looks at some of the experiences of parents as reported to the author in a focus group and three semi-structured interviews during a research project as part of a master's degree in Child, Family and Community Studies with Technical University Dublin.

Since March 2020, ECEC services have been challenged by an onslaught of restrictions imposed by public health guidelines during the global pandemic. Additional measures after a period of lockdown included infection control, increased cleaning and sanitation, and the separation of children into individual pods. There were struggles to keep classrooms open, and in some cases services had to close during periods of Covid infection.

The guidelines issued by the government suggested that ECEC services should not allow parents inside the facility (Government of Ireland, 2021). Managers' and educators' stress levels increased significantly as a result of Covid (Matson, 2020). Face-to-face contact and conversation with parents ceased in many circumstances, with communication taking place instead by phone, email, or text message. For the main part, parents were relieved that their ECEC service remained open and their children could continue to attend, whether it

was to enable parents to work or for children to attend for their preschool sessional service.

Partnership with families

The importance of effective partnership between families and ECEC services is well documented. Many studies highlight the impact of positive reciprocal relationships between ECEC services and parents as being beneficial to the service, the families, and the children who attend the service (Knight-McKenna et al., 2019; Uusimäki et al., 2019).

The restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 era may have prevented effective engagement with families and parents, and services may need to rethink their partnership strategy in order to re-establish this key area of practice.

Parents' lived experiences

Parents reported that they could not have informal chats at drop-off or collection and instead were recommended to email or phone the ECEC service. There were few opportunities for parents to have face-to-face meetings to discuss concerns about their child or to share anecdotes from home. Christmas nativity plays, carol services, and family meet days were cancelled. In many cases, end-of-year graduations were cancelled. Open days and face-to-face parent introductory meetings either moved online or did not happen at all.

These planned events are important for families. It is during these events that relationships are built, families get to meet their child's educators, children get to meet other children, and families get to meet other families. Many lost out on these opportunities. Some parents said they had never seen inside their child's classroom and so had no sense of familiarity with the ECEC service, even though their child spent more waking hours there than at home. They said they did not know the other parents or children in their child's class.

Parents were complimentary about their child's ECEC services, however, and believed that the services were doing all they could in the circumstances. Parents were invited to Zoom story-time and circle-time meetings for their children during lockdown periods and were sent information and activity ideas for their children. Communication was effective, with parents being kept up to date with information about the service and about the current Covid situation in their service at the time.

All parents expressed feeling anxious and worried about their child while they attended their ECEC service during Covid-19. But it is notable that they said they trusted the service to keep their child safe and had confidence in the service. Parents said that their ECEC setting cared about their child. This shows that despite the lack of face-to-face contact, relationships were built and these relationships were positive, meaningful, and important.

Moving on and reconnecting

When recognising the importance of relationships and partnership with families, it is important to note that parents reported positive experiences even during the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Trust was upheld and parents were happy with their child's service. This is testament to the hard work of managers and educators throughout the sector. ECEC services worked hard to support positive relationships with parents and showed leadership in their innovation in engaging parents by establishing Zoom story times and sending suggestions for learning at home during the lockdown periods.

It would be useful to think about how ECEC services could now work towards reconnecting with families to result in effective partnership in the post-Covid era. Will services keep the 'parent at the door' practice, or are the doors now completely open? Can some of the lessons learned from Covid be continued in practice?

Zoom became an effective communication medium. This method can be used in partnership with parents. By using Zoom and similar platforms, parents can be brought into the setting virtually during events they are physically unable to attend. Parents and family members could be encouraged to use such media to engage with the service in a meaningful way, such as sharing family life experiences.

Perhaps not having congested hallways at drop-off and collection times is a positive outcome from Covid restrictions, instead having parents inside the ECEC setting in a more structured way. Ideas for building effective and stable relationships with families are parent 'Stay and Play' days and having an open-door policy for discussion and meetings.

Covid-19 taught us that we can endure and that we are creative and innovative. We now need to embrace the learnings, reconnect, and come up with innovative ideas for partnership with families, ideas that will endure and continue to benefit all of the stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care.

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2 Primary



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

▶ The dramatic change effected by Covid-19 provided the opportunity to re-think the purpose of education.

▶ Amazing resilience was demonstrated by teachers and schools in responding to the pandemic and to the inward migration of children seeking refuge from crisis.

▶ Teacher supply concerns posed a threat to the high standard of education in our schools.





Contemporary Perspectives on Primary Education

A time for change?



Education has changed dramatically because of Covid-19. We are learning to live and work with levels of precariousness that we never thought possible. How prepared are our children and our system for this fast-changing world? This overview of primary education looks at the key themes in the sector and how the landscape is set to continue changing in the coming years.



Teresa O'Doherty
President of Marino
Institute of Education,
Dublin

Covid-19 impact

Education has changed dramatically because of Covid-19. We are learning to live and work with levels of precariousness that we never thought possible. Closing schools to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in March 2020 initiated a phase of change so radical and so profound that it will take time to appreciate the impact it has had on society at large and in particular on children and teachers.

While teaching and learning continued remotely throughout 2020–21, the impact of school closures on children has been significant, with research suggesting that children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage fared worst. When children could not come to school, the importance of being with peers and maintaining personal relationships with their friends and teacher came into sharp relief. Everyone realised something that teachers have always known: that relationships are at the heart of education and that learning in community, learning with and from our interactions, and engaging socially are pivotal to the educational experience.

As the prevalence of Covid-19 created an expected swell in illness and resulting staff and pupil absences in late 2021, a key priority across all sectors was to keep our schools open. An acute shortage of substitute teachers arose during the winter period and, following a request from Minister Norma Foley, all teacher education providers deferred regular teacher education programme schedules to enable years 3 and 4 student teachers on concurrent programmes and all student teachers on consecutive (PME – professional master of education) programmes to provide substitution cover for schools before and after Christmas.

Teacher supply

In order to ensure that student teachers at primary level could continue to support schools up to the February mid-term break, a 'framework

for adapted school placement arrangements' was developed through collaboration among the higher education institutions, the Department of Education, and the Teaching Council. Although it was challenging for principals to navigate the reopening of schools in early January, and the absence of qualified substitutes was keenly felt, the availability of 2,000 student teachers helped ensure that schools remained open. While we recognise that employing students as substitute teachers is not desirable, in the exigencies of the time it was a welcome support to school communities who so generously accept student teachers on placement throughout the year.

One unexpected outcome of our Covid-19 experience is the acute shortage of substitute teachers. Although teacher supply has been the focus of research and planning by the Department over a number of years, the anticipated over-supply of teachers in the primary sector based on demographic trends has not materialised. Instead, the capacity to respond to unplanned teacher absences, and to ensure that all children have a qualified teacher each day, has been a concern for schools throughout 2022.

“One unexpected outcome of our Covid-19 experience is the acute shortage of substitute teachers.”

The under-supply of teachers at second level has been predicted for some time, as the number of children in this sector has grown. However, the solution to a teacher shortage is not to shorten the duration of teacher education programmes, as has been suggested by some in the media. Rather, we need to buttress the quality of our teachers, secure the time they need in teacher preparation programmes, and make teacher education financially viable for students. The costs of fees, accommodation, and deferred income, allied with the prospect of casual employment or short-term contracts when qualified, combine to reduce the attractiveness of second-level teaching.

Ireland is in an enviable position internationally, where teaching is still an attractive and respected profession and where high-achieving young people still have ambitions to become teachers. This is not the norm elsewhere. We must act now to ensure that the quality of our teachers is maintained and that teaching remains a profession of choice for our most talented and capable graduates. The quality of our education system is premised on the quality of our teachers. Lessons from other jurisdictions, where entry requirements have fallen and teacher education has been truncated or translated into in-school apprenticeships, illustrate how the culture and tradition of teaching can be diminished within one generation.

Classroom diversity

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war unfolding on our screens each day have accentuated the unpredictable nature of our lives. While abhorring the level of violence being meted out in Europe today, we admire the resilience of the people of Ukraine. The Irish nation has

responded generously, and Irish schools have welcomed 12,500 children seeking refuge from the crisis into their communities.

The inclusion of these children, the complexity of their needs, and the supports they and their carers require have been embraced by schools across the State. The response of primary schools has been immediate, informed by the realisation that all children need the normal engagement and routine of schooling, being with their peers, and experiencing the joys and challenges of school life.

Relatively recently Ireland was considered to be largely a culturally homogenous society. Today, as a result of immigration, it is estimated that 10%–15% of the school-going population were born outside Ireland, and in some schools the proportion of newcomer children can reach 50%. Primary teachers have responded with agility and flexibility to the multilingual communities in their classrooms. The teaching profession itself, especially at primary level, is less culturally and ethnically diverse than in other OECD countries. Projects such as the Migrant Teacher Project at Marino Institute of Education work with teachers who have qualified outside the State, providing an induction to the Irish education system and preparing these teachers to restart their teaching careers in Ireland.

“Since independence, the Irish primary school curriculum has changed on only three occasions.”

While it is important that we focus on diversity in our classrooms and the rich linguistic heritage of our immigrant children, it is equally important that we value and promote our Irish language. On foot of the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022*, which articulated a need for specialised teachers to teach in Irish settings, an Irish-medium degree programme for primary-level teachers was established at Marino Institute of Education in 2019. The programme is the first of its kind since the foundation of the State, and the first cohort of students on this programme will graduate in 2023. We are confident that these graduates will make a significant contribution to the supply of high-quality teachers for Gaeltacht and Irish-medium schools into the future.

Curriculum reform

Curriculum is a valuable mirror of our society and an expression of the values and content we wish to hand on to the next generation. Since independence, the Irish primary school curriculum has changed on only three occasions. This, in and of itself, is an example of the continuity with the past that prevails in education. Our 1971 curriculum focused on the centrality of the child in all learning, and this central tenet was revisited and re-articulated in our 1999 curriculum.

The rate and pace of change have been dramatic over the last quarter century, and so we now have another exciting opportunity to engage in curriculum reform, something that does not come too often. Aware of the necessity to revisit approaches to literacy and numeracy in schools, we have seen the Primary Language Curriculum already revised over the last

five years, and the mathematics curriculum is now ready to be implemented in schools.

This piecemeal revision did not address the wider questions as to the purpose of education for our children in a modern and global environment. It is therefore timely that the structure, content, and philosophical underpinnings of our curriculum are now reviewed and revised. The proposed revised curriculum seeks to bring greater cohesion to children's learning, with an integrated approach to subjects in the junior and middle classes. It gives greater agency to the teacher in the programme, and it prioritises inquiry-based learning. It is proposed that schools will have greater discretion over the use of time and the approaches they adopt to teaching and learning.

As the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultation concludes, we must use our voices and engage in this process because our curricula, once established and implemented, have traditionally become long-standing features of our education landscape.

Inclusion

Inclusion and diversity are now pivotal values in Irish education. The inclusion of children with additional needs in our local schools is a priority for all parents. The availability of special classes in schools, and the staffing and other appropriate resources to support these children and their families, continue to be a matter of grave concern. Despite the goodwill of all, there are still families and schools seeking appropriate supports for children with special educational needs. The extension of DEIS status to more schools has been very welcome during this year, recognising the value and impact of DEIS supports to make measurable improvements in children's learning and to reduce the inequalities that exist in society.

Typically, primary children love their school, their friends, and their teacher. That love for their teacher, and the level of national respect for teachers more generally, was illustrated most poignantly in the tragic death of Aisling Murphy in January 2022. People across the State stopped to mourn the loss of a wonderful, loving daughter, sister, friend, inspiring teacher, musician, and athlete – adored by her pupils, respected by her school community. Aisling's tragic death shone a light on violence against women, but also on the amazingly talented cohort of teachers in our schools, who populate our classrooms each day. The sympathies of the nation go to Aisling's family and her colleagues in Durrow National School – go raibh leaba i measc na naomh ag Aisling.

Typically, primary children love their school, their friends, and their teacher.

Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, the last year has given us much cause for reflection. Now that we are hopefully in a post-Covid-19 phase, are we returning to the pre-pandemic norms of education? What have we learned that might change our experiences? With the increased appreciation of interactions and relationships in schools, combined with the ready availability of curriculum-related material online, it is time for a good debate on the future role of teachers. How can our next generation of teachers be prepared for a society that requires resilience and strong relationships, where e-learning is a vital component of life, and where our youth must navigate the ubiquitous superficiality of social media?

It is just a decade since the duration, structure, content, and nature of initial teacher education for primary teachers was radically reformed. Initial teacher education programmes must now be research-informed, and graduates must be both research literate and research active, and prepared to address the ever-changing needs of their pupils and schools – in terms of special education, linguistic and cultural diversity, global awareness, and sustainability.

The quality of a system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, and if Ireland wishes to retain the high quality of education that we have built up over generations, it is essential that the recent advances in teacher education are not undermined by immediate teacher-supply concerns. It is equally important that our beginning teachers are prepared to use technology in all its guises appropriately in their teaching.

Our children too are changing – they are now less physically active than they were a decade ago, they spend more time on social media, and they are facing a world where the rate of change is accelerating and the sustainability of the planet is threatened. There are big questions to be asked about the future of education in Ireland and the way that young children and people interact with the world. While the NCCA review of the curriculum framework is a step in the right direction, it does seem timely that the government should respond to the recent call for the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Education.

Projects, such as the Migrant Teacher Project, work with teachers who have qualified outside the State, preparing these teachers to restart their teaching careers in Ireland.



Forum on Patronage and Pluralism – a 10-Year Review

What has been achieved?



Prof Áine Hyland
Emeritus Professor of
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This article reviews the progress to date on the recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, chaired by Professor John Coolahan, which submitted its report in April 2012 to the then Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn. The Forum made a number of recommendations on how the Irish education system could provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools catering for all religions and none, and on how this could be achieved.

Ownership of national schools in Ireland

National or primary schools in Ireland are privately owned but publicly funded. In more than 95% of schools, the patrons are bishops (Catholic or Church of Ireland) and the owners of the buildings are diocesan trustees – Catholic, Church of Ireland, or trustees nominated by other churches. In the case of Educate Together schools and Gaelscoileanna set up in the past 40 years under the patronage of An Foras Patrúnachta, the patron is a limited company.

All national schools built before the year 2000 are vested in trustees or in a trust. Catholic national schools are vested in a diocesan trust or trustees. On receipt of a government building grant, usually around 90% of the building costs, those trusts or trustees signed an official lease stating that the building would be used for national school purposes for 99 years from the date of the lease. The leases were tripartite: The owner of the site was the first party to the lease, the Minister for Education was the second, and the trust or trustees were the third.

Trustees also committed to 'repaying the unexpended value of the grant' if the school ceased to be used for national school purposes within 99 years. In most cases, the first party to the lease, i.e., the site owner, was also the diocesan trust or trustees. and after 99 years the lease would revert to them.

The first multi-denominational school since the foundation of the State was set up by a group of parents and supporters in Dalkey, south County Dublin, in 1978. Its patron was a limited company called the Dalkey School Project, and the patron had to provide a temporary premises, in which the school started, and a site on which to build a permanent school. The movement for multi-denominational schools grew throughout the country, and initially each school had to have its own patron. An umbrella body, Educate Together, was set up in 1984,

and in the mid-1990s the Department of Education recognised Educate Together as a patron of national schools.

Deeds of Variation

Following the passing of the 1998 Education Act, the Department of Education began to provide sites and buildings for national schools and to lease them to recognised patrons. During negotiations with the churches leading up to the passing of the Education Act, the Department agreed to allow the old leases for national schools to be 'varied' – that is, they agreed to Deeds of Variation, which legally recognised the denominational nature of Catholic and Protestant schools.

Before that date, national school leases specifically precluded any such recognition. The Deeds of Variation of schools under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Church stated that the schools should be managed 'in accordance with the doctrines, practices and traditions' of that church, that members of their boards of management should 'make and keep themselves familiar with the ethos of the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Faith insofar as the same relates to education and schools', and that they should 'manage and cause the school to be managed in a manner which will uphold and foster such ethos'.

It is not clear whether all, some, or any of the trustees of national schools under Catholic patronage have signed these Deeds of Variation, but if a patron of a Catholic school wished to claim legal privilege in copper-fastening the Catholic ethos of their school, they could now do so.

“ If a patron of a Catholic school wished to claim legal privilege in copper-fastening the Catholic ethos of their school, they could now do so. ”

Forum on Patronage and Pluralism 2011–2012

In 2011, recognising the growing demand for multi-denominational and non-denominational education, the newly elected Fine Gael/Labour government set up a Forum to report on 'how it can best be ensured that the education system can provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools catering for all religions and none' and on the practicalities of achieving this.

In April 2012 the Forum, chaired by the late Professor John Coolahan, submitted its report to the then Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn. Recognising that 96% of all national schools were under denominational patronage (90% under Catholic patronage), the 174-page report stated there was a mismatch 'between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society'.

The report provided valuable information on the religious and demographic profile of national schools and identified the challenges that would have

to be overcome to provide a religiously and culturally diverse education system. It pointed out that out of 3,169 mainstream primary schools, only 58 were Educate Together schools and five were under the patronage of the VECs (Vocational Education Committees).

It identified three categories of schools which would be encountered when attempting to increase the number of schools under multi- or non-denominational patronage: (a) schools in green-field areas where residential housing was being developed and in areas where additional school places were required; (b) 'catchment areas' where there were already a number of schools under the same patronage but where it was unlikely that additional places would be required; and (c) 'stand-alone' schools – areas with only one school and where it was not envisaged that the demographic would require further schools to be set up.

Category (a): In the case of green-field areas and areas where the need for further school places had been identified, the report recommended that a register of parents of preschool children be established. An independent survey should be carried out in these areas to give these parents/guardians an opportunity to indicate their preference for a type of school patronage. The Department would then provide the type of school sought by the majority of parents.

Category (b): In catchment areas where there were already a number of schools, a process should be set up to identify parental preferences and to move towards a situation where at least one of the existing buildings under church patronage could be divested and transferred to a multi-denominational or non-denominational patron. Where very significant demand for a new school type had already been evidenced (the Department had evidence of 47 such areas), the report recommended that these areas should be prioritised and that the Department, in consultation with established patrons, should seek to find out if a building could be made available from existing school stock.

Category (c): In relation to stand-alone schools, the report conceded that change of patronage could be problematic. It stated that where a stand-alone school community had gathered evidence that change of patronage was warranted, 'a calm reflective process should follow'. However, it made some recommendations about current school practices, especially those relating to denominational religious education. It recommended that 'boards of management who are or may be accommodating children from diverse backgrounds in their school, should develop a school policy, in accordance with the Department's Diversity Protocol and in consultation with parents, on the measures that the school will put in place to meet their obligations to children and parents.'

The report also recommended that sacramental preparation, or education for religious rites or other belief systems, should not encroach on the time allocated for the general curriculum. It recommended ongoing discussion

“ The report recommended that sacramental preparation, or education for religious rites or other belief systems, should not encroach on the time allocated for the general curriculum. ”

“ All newly established mainstream primary schools which opened in the last five years have been under multi-denominational patronage. Yet, in 2021, Catholic schools still comprised 88.6% of primary schools. ”

with parents and clergy on the parish role in sacramental preparation. It expressed the view that all children have the right to access a programme on Education about Religious Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics and that the State has the responsibility to ensure this is provided.

While the report recognised an urgency for action on divesting, it advised against a 'big bang or radical upheaval approach', recommending instead that change of patronage should happen in a phased, incremental way.

10 years later, what has been achieved?

The most recent statistics from the Department of Education show that in 2021 there were 160 multi- and non-denominational schools in the country, out of a total of 3,104 mainstream schools (down by 55 from 3,159 in 2011). In that decade, 126 Catholic and 12 Church of Ireland schools closed, due to amalgamations and declining school populations, while the number of multi-denominational schools increased by 80.

All newly established mainstream primary schools which opened in the last five years have been under multi-denominational patronage. Most of them started in temporary premises of various kinds, such as private residences, warehouses, and prefabs. Yet despite these changes, Catholic schools still comprise the vast majority of primary schools, at 88.6% in 2021.

In the same decade, the total enrolments in Catholic national schools increased by 23,342, while enrolments in multi-denominational schools increased by 12,934. The proportion of pupils in Catholic primary schools is still over 89% overall. However, enrolments in Catholic schools have fallen by more than 18,000 in the past three years, while enrolments in multi-denominational schools continue to grow, by more than 5,000 in three years.

Progress since 2012 in the various categories

Category (a): In the first category of schools, the recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism are being implemented by the Department of Education. Most of the new schools which opened in the last 10 years are multi-denominational schools under the patronage of either Educate Together or the Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Category (b): The situation has been very slow in the second category, that of legal divesting of existing church-owned national schools. The Department of Education stated in January 2022 that 20 new multi-denominational schools have been established under patronage divestment and a more recent 'reconfiguration' process. In 2012, the Department identified 23 towns/areas in which there was clear and urgent demand for a multi-denominational school.¹ These became priority areas for the Department.

Eleven of these areas now have Educate Together schools. Six are housed in former national school buildings, which suggests they were subject to divestment or reconfiguration. One school is housed in an old vocational/technical school. The other four are in various types of building which do not appear to have been national schools: a business park building, hotel, private house, etc. An existing Catholic school in Nenagh has (from September 2022) been transferred to ETB patronage. No multi-denominational school has been set up in the other 12 towns/areas, in spite of ongoing campaigns by parents seeking such a school.

Setting up a multi-denominational school in 23 areas, and seeking to have some existing patrons divest one of their buildings, might not have seemed an unduly daunting task when it was first mooted 10 years ago; indeed, many people regarded it as too modest a target. It is disappointing that only 11 have been set up. It is particularly disappointing that only six were set up in buildings vacated by and made available by church bodies, in spite of the commitment of church and state to the principle of divestment.²

Category (c): While increasing numbers of stand-alone schools throughout the country have welcomed significant numbers of pupils from non-Irish and non-Christian backgrounds in the past 10 years, and treated them with respect and esteem, the formal patronage structure of these schools remains unchanged. Teachers have responded with commendable alacrity to the diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious balance in their classrooms, often with little or no additional support or resources, but the recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism that a programme on Education about Religious Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics be offered in every school has not been implemented.

“ The recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism that a programme on Education about Religious Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics be offered in every school has not been implemented.

In September 2022 the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin announced that preparation for the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation would move to the parish rather than be undertaken in schools. However, it has made it clear that Catholic schools will continue to provide children with ‘an education in the sacraments’ through junior infants and up to sixth class. There has been no statement from the Department of Education as to whether or when a programme on Education about Religious Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics will be made available to all schools.

The future?

The Department of Education has set a target of 400 multi- or non-denominational primary schools by the year 2030. This would amount to about 13% of all primary schools. Given that the population projections by the Central Statistics Office predict a fall in the number of pupils attending primary schools in the foreseeable future, the Department is reluctant to commit to opening further multi-denominational schools in addition to the existing Church-run schools and seems to be relying on divestment or reconfiguration to achieve its target. If the trend of the last 10 years

continues, with only one or two schools divested every year, it is difficult to see how the target will be met.

Following the spring 2022 meeting of the Episcopal Commission, pilot arrangements were agreed between the bishops and the Department of Education involving the possible ‘reconfiguration’ or transfer of eight Catholic schools to other patrons. The areas named were Arklow, Athlone, Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, and Youghal. Under the deal, the State will pay rent to the Catholic Church for the school buildings that transfer to multi-denominational patronage under new 40-year leases. The Church will retain ownership of the buildings and receive appropriate rents which will take into account that the schools may have benefited from State capital investment. The Department has appointed independent facilitators to negotiate with school communities, and their work is ongoing at the time of writing (September 2022).

Even if this process is successful, the task of reaching the government target of 400 multi- or non-denominational schools by 2030 will be challenging. And even if that target is met, there will remain some areas of the country with unmet demand for such schools. The United Nations Expert Committee of the Rights of the Child has pointed out more than once that Ireland is in breach of the Convention on Human Rights by denying access to non-religious-run schools to so many of its young people. And the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) recently stated that ‘while the Commission has welcomed commitments by the State to establish more multi-denominational schools, it shares the UN Committee’s concerns about the slow progress to date’.

ENDNOTES

1. The towns/areas were Fermoy, Castlebar, Dublin 12, Tuam, New Ross, Malahide/Portmarnock, Trim, Tramore, Ballina, Dublin 8, Westport, Arklow, Clonmel, Cobh, Dungarvan, Kells, Killarney, Loughrea, Nenagh, Palmerstown, Passage West, Shannon, and Dublin 9.
2. In the 1980s, when this author was chair of Educate Together and when demand for multi-denominational schools began to build throughout the country, six of the early Educate Together schools were housed in former church-owned national school buildings.

In September 2022 the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin announced that preparation for the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation would move to the parish rather than be undertaken in schools.

Supporting the Wellbeing and Mental Health of Primary School Pupils

The importance of schools in fostering children's positive mental health



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Recent years have seen schools rise to global challenges, including pandemic and war, offering safety and security to children. These events have brought wellbeing to the fore for everyone, highlighting the importance of schools in the lives of our children. This article examines that role and describes how schools can help children develop vital skills and resilience through a supportive environment and relationships.

Introduction

The last few years have brought challenges to schools in Ireland as school communities responded to a global pandemic and then to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Schools rose to the challenge and offered safety and security to children during these times of difficulty, change, and transition. Many schools have now welcomed children from Ukraine. These unprecedented events have brought wellbeing to the fore for everyone, highlighting the importance of school in the lives of our children.

The Hobfoll principles of promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, efficacy, and hope are key evidence-based principles of support, known to help people regain a sense of normalcy and wellbeing in the aftermath of emergencies or traumatic events (Hobfoll et al., 2007). They are familiar to schools, as they formed the basis of the Department of Education's response to supporting wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children will do better in the long term if they feel safe, calm, and hopeful, if they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their new school, and if they feel they can manage and cope. Applying these five principles will help a school community, in its own unique way, to foster children's and young people's resilience. Guidance documents



Schools are important settings for preparing children and young people to develop wellbeing and positive mental health.

Why schools have an important role

There is a recognised connection between the cognitive and the emotional worlds of children and young people. In the school environment, social and emotional skills do not exist in isolation but interact with the development of cognitive skills. School is now understood as a place which develops the 'whole child', one who should leave school with a balanced set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills to face the challenges of the 21st century (Hewlett & Moran, 2014). Hargreaves et al. (2018) identify the mutually supportive relationships between children's wellbeing and their achievements and emphasise the importance of this reciprocal relationship.

Schools are important settings for preparing children and young people to develop wellbeing and positive mental health, where emotional wellbeing may be understood as an educational end in and of itself. Risk and protective factors related to promoting wellbeing that are specific to the school or educational setting have been identified. These factors include:

- positive relationships with peers and teachers, including positive classroom management strategies and sharing positive behaviour-management practices with parents
- a sense of belonging, security, and connectedness to school through a positive school climate and participation in school and community activities
- opportunities for social and emotional learning, including the development of attention and planning, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2015)
- opportunities for the development of knowledge and skills providing a sense of mastery and self-efficacy (Shonkoff et al., 2015)
- fostering expectations; recognising contributions, effort, and achievement; and providing opportunities for success
- wellbeing of school personnel
- protocols and support systems that proactively support children and their families should difficulties arise
- opportunities to develop the necessary skills to cope with using online technology in a safe and appropriate way
- opportunities to develop skills to manage stress that may be linked to school work.

Protective factors promote positive outcomes for children and young people, even when they have been exposed to risk factors (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011) such as disengagement, isolation, bullying, violence, special educational needs, cultural differences, or harsh discipline. In the school

context, therefore, it is recommended that preventative wellbeing promotion be implemented, with a focus on strengthening school-based protective factors and minimising school-based risk factors.

How can the Department of Education help?

Schools are already doing a lot to promote wellbeing and equip children with knowledge, skills, and competencies to enhance their wellbeing and deal with challenges. To build on this work and ensure that wellbeing is truly embedded in our schools, the Department of Education published the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice in 2018, refreshed in 2019. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the Department is leading on the rollout of a wide range of actions in the Wellbeing Policy, and a separate Wellbeing Office has been established in NEPS, emphasising the importance that the Department places on this work.

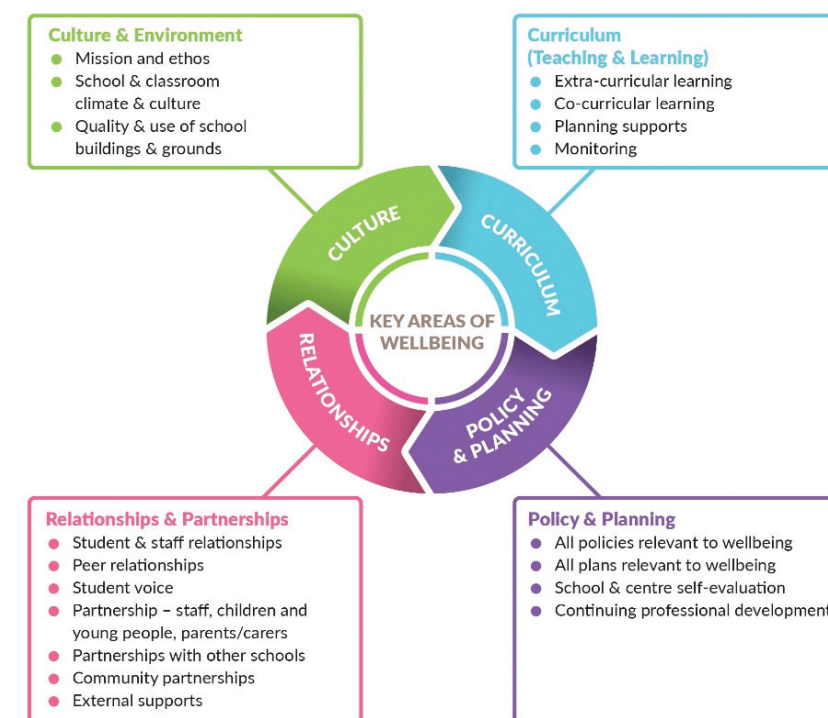
The Department has an Employee Assistance Service in place, provided by Spectrum.Life, as a supportive resource to promote the health and wellbeing of school employees, with a strong focus on prevention.

The Department's Wellbeing Policy defines wellbeing as follows:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life.

The policy proposes a preventative, multi-component, whole-school approach to supporting wellbeing and mental health that includes both universal and targeted actions and focuses on four key components:

1. To provide children and young people with opportunities to be part of a school environment and culture that feels physically safe and psychologically safe, where they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, where their voice is heard, and where they feel supported.
2. To provide children and young people with opportunities to experience supportive relationships within the school community.
3. To give children and young people opportunities to experience success and a sense of achievement in their learning, and to develop and build core physical, social, and emotional skills and competencies.
4. To ensure that approaches to supporting wellbeing and resilience are embedded in all of the school's policies and practices.



Schools are encouraged to use a reflective, self-evaluation approach to identify and prioritise the needs of their own school community in relation to promoting wellbeing and mental health, and to respond to meeting those needs. Embedded in the whole-school approach is the recognition that members of the school community may have different needs at different times and that a continuum of support for wellbeing should be made available.

To support schools' continuous professional development (CPD) for school leaders and teachers on the national rollout of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, training began in March 2022, following delays due to Covid-19. This is a major step to achieving the goals of embedding wellbeing across the whole spectrum of activity in our schools.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is leading on this comprehensive programme of CPD, which will be supplemented with a range of parallel training, including resources for schools developed by NEPS. For example:

- NEPS psychologists train teachers in the delivery of the FRIENDS Resilience programmes ('Fun Friends', 'Friends for Life', and 'My Friends Youth'), which are evidence-based programmes for preventing anxiety and building resilience.

- Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM) is an evidenced-based programme that builds teachers' competence and confidence in managing their classrooms, using strategies that prevent and reduce behaviour problems and promote children's social and emotional competence. Over six days of training, teachers can reflect on the effective use of classroom management strategies and the development of comprehensive behaviour-support plans.
- NEPS also offers wellbeing training and support sessions in welcoming and helping pupils fleeing the war in Ukraine.
- A series of training on Wellbeing and Resilience in Schools is also on offer to schools. The first training, 'Introducing a Trauma-Informed Approach, the Stress Factor: Getting the Balance Right', was delivered in the summer term 2022 to primary and post-primary school staff through Education Support Services Ireland (ESCI). The training is now being offered to school leaders because of their important role in embedding practices in their schools. The workshops, which are for all staff, focus on exploring and understanding the sources and impact of stress on children and young people, including attachment, trauma, and adverse experiences. Following the webinars, NEPS psychologists will be available to support implementation in schools.

A dedicated wellbeing portal has been developed and is now available, bringing together all the wellbeing supports and resources that have been developed by the Department and its support service.

The Department has an Employee Assistance Service (EAS) in place as a supportive resource to promote the health and wellbeing of school employees, with a strong focus on prevention. Provided by SpectrumLife, it is a self-referral service where employees have access to a 24/7 freephone helpline (1800 411 057) providing advice on a range of issues, such as wellbeing, legal, financial, mediation, and management support. The service is also available via SMS, WhatsApp, email, live chat, and call-back request. All points of contact for the service are qualified, accredited, and experienced mental health professionals.

NEPS offers wellbeing training and support sessions in welcoming and helping pupils fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Where required, short-term counselling is available to employees and their family members (over the age of 18 years and living at home). A wellbeing portal and app is available which offers access to webinars, presentations, podcasts, e-learning programmes, and live chats on wellbeing and mental health, family life, exercise, and nutrition. The service also provides advice and support to managers and delivers interventions to help them deal with health and wellbeing issues in the workplace.

All services provided through the EAS are in total confidence. People's identity and personal details will always be protected by the EAS case managers and their team of counsellors. This information will never be shared with or reported to an employer or anyone else without the employee's clear consent.

Conclusion

Promoting the wellbeing of our children and young people is a shared community responsibility and is everybody's business. While many factors that influence a child's wellbeing are beyond a school's reach, schools can be a powerful setting for healthy development and can provide an accessible and effective means to promote protective factors and reduce risk factors. Schools provide a stable and supportive environment for all students while developing core skills and competencies in supportive relationships – all of which are vital protective factors for the development of resilience and coping.

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All services provided through the Employee Assistance Service are in total confidence.



The Rise of Teaching and Learning Outdoors in Irish Primary Schools



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This article sets out the context and rationale for teaching and learning outdoors in primary schools, and highlights various ways of incorporating its use by schools, including exemplars of practice. It also discusses system-wide supports that are needed. Ultimately, it argues that the best time to start using the outdoors for teaching and learning is now and that teachers should 'just do it'.

Background

One of the unforeseen benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic for schools has been the increased educational value placed on the outdoors. Outdoor learning is conceptualised as learning that takes place not just outside the classroom but outside school buildings themselves, in the open air (Kelly, 2022). As virus transmission rates are greatly reduced in open spaces, the local outdoor school environment and beyond became a magnet for teaching and learning.

This article sets out the historical context for teaching and learning outdoors, both internationally and nationally. It highlights various methods for schools to incorporate outdoor teaching and learning, including exemplars of practice, and the rationale for doing so. It also advocates for system-wide supports to enhance this practice across the curriculum at primary level. Ultimately, it argues that the best time to start using the outdoors for teaching and learning is now.

The use of the outdoors as part of teaching and learning is deeply embedded in the philosophies of many great education thinkers, including Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, John Dewey and Johann Pestalozzi. Indeed, the term *Kindergarten*, or 'child's garden', was coined by Froebel (1826) to represent the use of the outdoors for the purpose of learning actively through play and enquiry.

Outdoor education has a long tradition in Scandinavian countries. *Udeskole*, for example, is a Danish educational practice in which learning takes place outdoors, led by the class teacher, one day each week. It is now practised in one fifth of all primary schools in Denmark (Barfod and Daugbjerg, 2018). Nearer to home, the use of the outdoors for teaching and learning in the UK has influenced government policy, reports, and the school curriculum for the last 27 years, especially in Scotland and Wales (Delahunty, 2021). Its implementation in Irish primary schools, however, is relatively new.

While the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) does highlight the value of the local outdoor environment for subjects such as geography, history, and science (NCCA, 1999), this does not appear to have been replicated in practice. Instead, a long-standing culture of teacher-led instruction in classrooms aided by textbooks, resulting in pupil rote learning, has dominated Irish primary education up to the current day (Usher, 2021). Policy provision in this regard has done little to enhance the practice since the PSC was launched in 1999.

In the 320 actions across 70 pages detailed in the Action Plan for Education 2016–2022, there is not a single reference to geography, history, nature, or the use of the outdoors more generally.

The recent increased emphasis on education to sustain economic success is detailed in the *Action Plan for Education 2016–2022* (DES, 2016). In all of its 320 actions across 70 pages there is not a single reference to geography, history, nature, or the use of the outdoors more generally. One would imagine that, at the very least, primary pupils would be learning about the natural world itself while outdoors. Yet a recent study of 510 primary teachers found that 87% use digital technology or books as the predominant method of teaching pupils about nature (Madden, 2019). The lack of emphasis on using the outdoors for teaching and learning, in both policy and practice, appears to have stymied its implementation.

The literature

Teaching and learning outdoors is a broad area. At its most basic level it involves teaching and learning simply taking place outdoors. At another level it encompasses first-hand pupil engagement outdoors to increase knowledge and skill development. At a deeper level again, it is a methodology with the outdoors supplying content, resources, and the location for cross-curricular learning experiences (Kelly, 2022).

The literature points to many cognitive, affective, and social benefits accruing from pupils learning outdoors (O'Donnell, forthcoming), offering a compelling rationale for its use. Enquiry-based, experiential engagement in the local outdoor environment gives pupils the opportunity to become active agents in their own learning, converting abstract concepts to concrete realities. The outdoor learning environment is also considered more inclusive for pupils, helping them to develop 21st-century skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Noticing nature and becoming familiar with the local outdoor environment also promotes pupils' understanding of the rhythm of the seasons, strengthens their sense of place, develops pro-environmental attitudes, and improves their wellbeing. At a time of rapid globalisation, mounting environmental and social issues, and an increased threat posed by biohazard risks, such understanding and appreciation have never been more important. Expecting our next generation to grapple with these global challenges would be unfair without first empowering them to connect with the planet Earth, starting with outside, near their home and school.

The use of the outdoors also takes account of pupil voice as part of their learning. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for children to have the right to a say in matters that affect them and to have those views taken into account in line with their age and maturity (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010). Recent studies on pupils' opinions about their learning show their preference for more teaching and learning to take place outdoors (Kilkelly et al., 2015).

A new study into using very good fieldwork as part of primary geography teaching concurs (O'Donnell, forthcoming). Pupils say they enjoy learning outdoors and wish that it happened more regularly. This comes at a time when children's contact time in the outdoors has severely diminished. A UK study concluded that three quarters of children surveyed spent less time outdoors on a daily basis than prison inmates (Carrington, 2016). This is a particularly stark and depressing statistic.

When considering how to increase the use of the local outdoor environment for teaching and learning, a two-year study of 75 primary school teachers in the Netherlands is a useful reference point (van Dijk-Wesselius et al., 2019). It identifies four broad barriers to outdoor learning, which may be familiar to many: outdoor learning not having formal status in teachers' practice, a perceived lack of teacher confidence, difficulties getting started, and physical environmental constraints. A solution to each barrier was found by following a process: engaging in real-life experiences, adopting a positive mindset, and getting educated. Ultimately, the study concludes that to realise outdoor learning, participants simply starting to take their classes outside to learn is all-important. To borrow a slogan: 'Just do it'.

In the absence of formal guidance or support, this is exactly what many teachers in Irish schools have done. In my own case, after trialling a number of methods, I started to teach one lesson outdoors per week for the whole school year. It began by simply moving the lesson outside. Over time, the local outdoor environment became a resource and an inspiration for a range of cross-curricular learning experiences. By keeping a weekly diary or journal on what they learned each week, pupils hugely increased their content acquisition, skill levels, sense of local place, and collaborative practice from the beginning of the school year. In addition, it became the highlight of their week. Just doing it really does work.

Schools gardens and other projects

School gardens have become a focal point for teaching and learning outdoors in many Irish schools. Austin (2017) found that gardens are used to integrate teaching and learning across subject areas and are highly valued by their schools for a range of reasons. With the help of parents, the board of management, and the local community, our school in Slane, Co. Meath, constructed such a garden, incorporating an outdoor classroom seated

Barriers to outdoor learning include: not having formal status in teachers' practice; a perceived lack of teacher confidence; difficulties getting started; physical environmental constraints.

Forest School offers learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or a natural environment with trees.

area for this purpose. The project expanded to greening the wider school grounds by constructing a pond, nest boxes, wildflower patches, and a mini-woodland, all with little money but lots of goodwill.

The projects have not only provided new teaching and learning opportunities but have also increased biodiversity in the school grounds. The pupils now have a company selling eggs from the school's hens. Participation in wider schemes provides a useful focal point for action. We engage in an innovative annual school gardening scheme coordinated by Meath County Council and An Taisce's Green Schools programme. We have been fortunate to become involved in an Erasmus+ programme with Dublin City University on play and learning outdoors, partnering with schools across the European Union. Many oaks from little acorns grow, so to speak.

Other schools have taken inspiration from the Irish Forest School movement. Forest School offers learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or a natural environment with trees. Teachers have availed of Forest School training or have partnered with local Forest Schools to increase their pupils' enriching outdoor learning experiences. Schools have also drawn inspiration from the growing provision of outdoor preschools in early childhood education by increasing their Aistear provision outdoors in infant classes.

In our own setting, we have created a sandpit, mud kitchen, and loose-parts play area for this purpose. Needless to say, persuading pupils to return indoors is now proving more challenging than getting them out in the first place.

Next steps

To progress schools' interest in outdoor teaching and learning, two areas require attention. First of all, due to the lack of data on provision, nationwide research is required to identify the prevalence, scope, and frequency of teaching and learning outdoors. Such an inventory would paint a picture of the current reality and provide a starting point for future planning and prioritisation.

The second, larger body of work is coherent, targeted, and sustained policy provision and practical support from the Department of Education to implement and embed these practices. In this regard there is reason for hope. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) sees teachers as 'curriculum makers' and highlights the importance of the outdoor environment to stimulate pupil learning.

With appropriate consultation, professional development, funding, and resourcing, this new curriculum may provide a framework for teaching and learning outdoors to thrive. In the meantime, the largest classroom of them

all, with the blue ceiling and green floor, awaits to facilitate innovative and exciting teaching and learning opportunities. The best time to start is now.

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How Networking Can Support DEIS Schools

The case for widespread introduction of DEIS school networks

Drawing on PhD research on the PLUS and Oscailt networks of DEIS schools, this article outlines the importance of networking as a practice for DEIS schools, and highlights the opportunity provided by the DEIS expansion in 2022 to consider the widespread introduction of DEIS school networks in Ireland.



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Introduction

In March 2022, the DEIS programme was expanded to include 322 additional schools. Drawing on recent PhD research on two networks of DEIS schools (Bourke, 2022) – the first piece of research nationally on the topic – this article reflects on the opportunity created by the DEIS expansion for widespread introduction of DEIS school networks.

Findings about the PLUS and Oscailt networks, which are facilitated by the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) project at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), illustrate the potential of school networks to support the professional learning, growth, and development of teachers and school leaders, and their capacity to support DEIS schools collectively.

Internationally, networking and collaboration have become prolific in education over the last two decades, with the widespread introduction of professional learning communities (PLCs), professional learning networks (PLNs), and communities of practice (CoPs). In Ireland, we saw the introduction of the School Excellence Fund Clusters (2017), with a specific strand for DEIS schools, and recognition by the Teaching Council's Cosán framework (2016) and Leadership in Our Schools (2016) documents that school networking can enhance teacher professional learning and development.

So what are school networks, and how do they differ from other forms of collaboration? In networks, members come together voluntarily for a shared purpose or activity (Church et al., 2002). Networks do not always encompass learning as explicitly expressed in the title of PLCs or PLNs, or to deepen practice as in CoPs. They may function purely to create connections with those in other organisations for a shared purpose.

The definition of networks that resonated most with PLUS and Oscailt recognises that collaboration provides opportunities for joint problem-solving:

A network . . . is a group of organisations working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organisation to handle on its own (Mandell, 1999). Applied to school, the idea of networks suggests that schools working together in a collaborative effort would be more effective in enhancing organisational capacity and improving student learning than individual schools working on their own. (Wohlstetter et al., 2003, cited in Chapman & Hadfield, 2010, p.310)

The PLUS and Oscailt networks

PLUS and Oscailt are two of the longest-serving networks of DEIS schools in Ireland. They emerged organically in response to needs identified by schools in Limerick city in 1998 and 2009, respectively.

PLUS comprises 14 DEIS band 1 schools and two special schools in Limerick city and county. Home school community liaison coordinators (HSCLs) primarily represent their school on the network, which meets six times a year. Meetings centre on topics relevant to DEIS schools, guest speakers, sharing of practice, and organisation of MIC initiatives, such as the annual League of Legends soccer tournament.

Oscailt is a network of 12 DEIS band 1 schools and four DEIS post-primary schools in Limerick city. It was established in 2009 by the Department of Education and TED to support the rollout of a Dormant Accounts initiative to maximise the use of schools for the wider community. When funding ceased, the principals decided to continue meeting, and it has evolved as a principal support network. Oscailt meets six times a year to discuss issues pertinent to the DEIS principal role and DEIS schools, for guest speakers, and to share practice. Both networks have also advocated on behalf of DEIS schools over the years.

Research approach

Data was gathered for case study research through focus groups, interviews, surveys, and documentary analysis (Stake, 1995). A conceptual framework to understand the networks was informed by policy, practice, and theory. This encompassed influential policy developments and drew on school network literature to establish the practice base and key elements in the analysis of school networks.

Social capital theory and communities of practice were adopted as theoretical lenses to understand how learning occurs and how the networks

PLUS and Oscailt are two of the longest-serving networks of DEIS schools in Ireland.

The networks were found to support key policy areas for schools, including the Wellbeing Framework, DEIS plans, and School Self-Evaluation.

operate at individual and collective level. The framework also draws on Bourdieu's theory on economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1997) to highlight social class and other differentials in educational outcomes, and to address the perpetuation of inequality in education through social reproduction and the ideology of meritocracy.

Key findings

Firstly, the networks enhance members' social capital. As members share experience and insight in this 'safe space', bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) is developed which fosters solidarity, cohesion, shared purpose, and shared vision to pursue collective goals. Bridging social capital (ibid.) enables members to connect with multiple external stakeholders to access information, expertise, and resources for their schools, and to advocate and raise awareness about the concerns of DEIS schools locally and nationally.

In doing so, the priorities and concerns of network members from DEIS schools become linked to those of stakeholders in other organisations through 'double-loop learning' (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p.21). Connections are made both vertically and laterally through linking social capital (Grootaert et al., 2004), which can facilitate communication between those at different levels of the system, that is, between those on the ground in DEIS schools and those in government departments.

The networks are also communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that enhance members' learning, professional development, and leadership skills. Bonding social capital is fostered through peer interaction, reciprocity, and the development of trusting relationships. The 'safe space' and 'mini-culture' (ibid., p.39) of the networks or CoPs provide the foundation for individual benefits of networking, as experienced by research participants.

These include access to the information relevant to their roles and DEIS schools, experience and knowledge of others working in similar contexts, supporting individual wellbeing of staff in DEIS schools, supporting professional learning and the formation of their professional identity, a sense of self-efficacy, and the capacity to fulfil their roles. These are important given the inequalities experienced by children and families in DEIS schools, and hence the challenges faced by principals, HSCLs, and other school staff.

Additionally, the networks were found to support key policy areas for schools, including the Wellbeing Framework (Government of Ireland, 2019), DEIS plans (DoE, 2017b), and School Self-Evaluation (DoE, 2012; DoE Inspectorate 2016a, 2016b). The research also explored the challenges of networking as experienced by participants, and the limitations of these particular networks.

Why networks of DEIS schools are important

Despite the additional funding for DEIS schools, research shows the persistent nature of educational inequality in outcomes for students, in terms of socio-economic differentials such as class and ethnicity (Drudy & Lynch, 1993; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Smyth et al., 2015; Smyth 2018a; Smyth 2018b) and disparities between those attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools (DoE, 2017a; Gilleece et al., 2020). Such evidence indicates that certain cohorts in Ireland are still at far greater risk than others of not achieving their potential (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Frawley, 2014; Fleming & Hartford, 2021). It also shows the need for early intervention (McNamara et al., 2020).

Evidence indicates that certain cohorts in Ireland are still at far greater risk than others of not achieving their potential, and also shows the need for early intervention.

School networks are important in a context where educational policy views 'educational disadvantage' as an isolated, school-based issue for teachers to deal with, rather than as a wider societal concern that recognises the endemic nature and intersectionality of inequality, which requires a whole-of-government response to social exclusion (Cahill, 2015; Fleming & Hartford 2021; Jeffers & Lillis, 2021).

Not only were PLUS and OSCAILT found to enhance members' professional learning, they have also played an important role in supporting schools and individual members to challenge the 'doxas' of their professional trade (Lynch, 2019, p.530), to respond to and advocate for children and families who experience daily the impact of intractable social and economic inequality, in the absence of a joined-up government response to educational inequality.

Conclusion

The pandemic brought about monumental changes that have profoundly impacted on society and our education system. Less affluent, more vulnerable and marginalised groups will suffer greater long-term consequences, such as the impact on children's learning, mental health, and wellbeing that are only now starting to be understood by teachers and principals.

We know that the profile of children and young people in DEIS schools differs markedly from non-DEIS schools (Smyth et al., 2015). DEIS schools need support from each other and from educational stakeholders. As the research described in this article shows, school networks can be a powerful mechanism to provide support in the absence of a joined-up government strategy on educational inequality, and to advocate for such a strategy.

The expansion of the DEIS programme in 2022 provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the benefits of school networks, as expressed by the PLUS and OSCAILT members, and to consider widespread introduction of networks for DEIS schools.

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School networks can be a powerful mechanism to provide support in the absence of a joined-up government strategy on educational inequality.

Global Village

A new strategic partnership for Global Citizenship Education in the primary school sector in Ireland

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) facilitates and encourages educators and learners to engage actively in critical thinking, discussion, exploration, and action on global themes such as injustice, inequality, and sustainability. This article introduces Global Village, a new programme for GCE in primary schools in Ireland.

Introduction

Global Village is the new strategic partnership for Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in the primary sector in Ireland. It is a joint effort by Irish Aid at the Department of Foreign Affairs,¹ and a consortium of Trócaire, Dublin City University (DCU), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN).

Global Village aims to enable primary school pupils to become active global citizens committed to building a fairer and more sustainable world, by increasing the reach, quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of GCE in primary schools. The 20-month pilot programme focuses on:

1. Research: mapping GCE activity in primary education and identifying gaps, particularly around inclusivity, accessibility, and voices from the Global South,² through resource mapping; a national survey of primary school leaders and teachers conducted by DCU; and a scoping study of the early years sector by DCU.
2. Networking: engaging and promoting GCE with stakeholders from the GCE and primary school sectors.
3. Professional support: providing high-quality continuous professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders through webinars, a tailored support programme for 15 pilot schools, and a website dedicated to GCE information and resources.
4. Measuring learning: developing, piloting, and promoting a framework and set of tools to measure GCE learning in primary schools.

What is Global Citizenship Education?

GCE has much in common with Development Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Intercultural Education, Human Rights Education, and Peace Education. Each is concerned with learning



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about, critically analysing, and responding to issues that affect communities around the world, such as poverty, systemic inequalities, discrimination, and conflict.

There are many definitions and descriptions of GCE. Global Village, drawing on the work of Trócaire (2018), views GCE as an active and creative educational process to increase awareness and understanding of the world. It should challenge perceptions and stereotypes by encouraging empathy, hope, participation, reflection, and action.

Learners are supported, in age-appropriate ways, to make connections between their own lives and international social-justice issues, to collaborate, cooperate, and be empowered to make a positive difference in the world. GCE should not reinforce stereotypes or deny differences. It facilitates critical thinking from a variety of perspectives. It is built on awareness, analysis, reflection, and action for justice and change.

Policy context

GCE is embedded in international and Irish policies. Internationally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations in September 2015. It sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to tackle huge global challenges including poverty, hunger, gender inequality, and climate change, and to bring about a more peaceful, prosperous, just, and sustainable world for all (UN DESA, 2015).

Global Village is the new strategic partnership for Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in the primary sector in Ireland.

Target 4.7 (part of Goal 4 – Quality Education) focuses on GCE:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UN DESA, 2015)

The Irish State is taking a whole-of-government approach to the SDGs, incorporating them into the work of each Department. Irish Aid, at the Department of Foreign Affairs, plays a central role in guiding, developing, and funding GCE. Its Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2021–2025 highlights Irish Aid's commitment to Global Village, a new strategic partnership to 'support Whole School Approaches, integrating GCE into all aspects of school life, including engaging school management and leadership' (DFA, 2021, p.19).

Global Village is working to consolidate and build upon prior successes of GCE at primary level, and to develop connections and partnerships with key actors working on GCE in Ireland. These include the DICE Project at

Global Village views Global Citizen Education (GCE) as an active and creative educational process to increase awareness and understanding of the world.

initial teacher education level, and many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which provide resources, training, and support to educators at primary level.

Global Village is also becoming a member of the IDEA (Irish Development Education Association) Code of Good Practice for Development Education. Using the Code as a guide, Global Village is incorporating principles such as 'use participatory, creative methodologies' and 'imagine and explore solutions for a better world' (IDEA, 2019) into the design and delivery of the pilot programme.

The primary school setting and GCE

There are myriad opportunities for GCE in the primary school setting. Global Village is committed to supporting primary school leaders and teachers to embed GCE into their work, through whole-school approaches and curricular work, including the following:

- Whole-school activities: reflecting upon links between the school ethos and GCE; identifying whole-staff, school community, and classroom opportunities to incorporate GCE values and themes, e.g., student council representing children's voices.
- Policies: analysing and adapting school policies from a diversity and inclusion perspective, e.g., how cultures, communities, and minority groups are welcomed, represented, and enabled to participate.
- Staff training: topic-specific training with NGOs, e.g., anti-racism training.
- Curriculum links: incorporating GCE thematic planning across the curriculum.
- Resources: auditing teaching and learning resources using a GCE lens, e.g., how African countries and people are represented in textbooks, picture books, and novels, and reflecting on whether these resources promote, challenge, or combat stereotypes.

Although GCE is not a discrete subject in the current Primary School Curriculum, certain aspects of GCE are reflected in curriculum aims, namely to enable children:

- 'to come to an understanding of the world through the acquisition of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes and the ability to think critically'
- 'to enable children to develop a respect for cultural difference, an appreciation of civic responsibility, and an understanding of the social dimension of life, past and present'
- 'to enable children to develop skills and understanding in order to study their world and its inhabitants and appreciate the interrelationships between them'. (DES, 1999, p.34)

GCE is most evident in Social, Environmental and Scientific Education



(SESE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), particularly at the senior end of the curriculum, as shown in the table. But there are many opportunities to incorporate GCE across the full curriculum.

For example, a cross-curricular, thematic approach to climate change could involve stories of climate champions from around the world (Language curriculum), analysis of statistics (Mathematics), role play of emotive and behavioural responses to climate change (Drama and SPHE), active games to explore challenges and solutions (Physical Education, SESE), and responding to or composing creative pieces on the theme of climate change (Music, Visual Arts).

Subject	Strand	Strand Unit	Class level
SESE Geography	Human environments	People and other lands	3rd–6th Class
		Trade and development issues	5th–6th Class
SESE History	Politics, conflict and society	Ireland, Europe, and the world, 1960 to the present	5th–6th Class
SESE Science	Environmental awareness and care	Environmental awareness; Science and the environment; Caring for the environment	3rd–6th Class
		Caring for my locality	Junior Infants – 2nd Class
SPHE	Myself and the wider world	Developing citizenship; Media education	Junior Infants – 6th Class

GCE in the Primary School Curriculum

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) identifies 'Being an Active Citizen' as one of seven Key Competencies underpinning the new curriculum. This inclusion of active citizenship is welcomed by Global Village.³ It is a positive and promising development, reflecting recognition – in Irish society and in the education sector – of our interdependence and collective responsibilities as members of the global community. Global Village advocates for GCE to be specifically referenced under the Wellbeing and/or Social and Environmental subject areas, named as essential learning, and for specific GCE learning outcomes to be included in the new curriculum.

Next steps

Through the pilot programme, running until July 2023, Global Village will be capturing what is learned about the opportunities and challenges for embedding GCE into the primary school setting. To find out more about Global Village, please contact info@globalvillageschools.ie and look out for the website, which will be launched soon: www.globalvillageschools.ie.

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ENDNOTES

1. The ideas, opinions, and comments herein are entirely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect Irish Aid policy.
2. A collective term for countries that have been and continue to be disadvantaged politically, socially, and economically through unjust and unequal global systems. Though geographically inaccurate, it is used in place of politically and historically weighted terms such as 'developing countries', 'poorer countries', and 'Third World'.
3. As noted in the Global Village written submission response to the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework, March 2022.

To find out more about Global Village, contact
info@globalvillageschools.ie.

And look out for the website,
www.globalvillageschools.ie,
which will be launched soon.





The DICE Project

Development and intercultural education in initial teacher education at primary level



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The DICE project is a national education initiative that promotes the integration of development education and intercultural education in initial teacher education across four partner institutions. This article outlines the project's work, aims, and values, and describes some of its recent events and activities.

The DICE project is a national education initiative that promotes the integration of development education and intercultural education in initial teacher education (ITE) at primary level in Ireland. Formed in 2003, it is a collaborative project between Marino Institute of Education, Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University, the Institute of Education in Dublin City University, and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, with support from Irish Aid.

The DICE project works to build the capacity of lecturers and student teachers so that teachers graduating will have an understanding of development education and intercultural education and will be motivated and equipped with the pedagogic skills and values to teach these topics effectively. Through this ongoing work, student teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, ideas, and capacities necessary to integrate development education and intercultural education across the primary school curriculum.

We believe that developing global citizenship is achieved most effectively through engaging diversified perspectives; building evidence through research; sharing ideas, discussion, and debate; building an engaging and inspiring community of practice based on trust and collegiality; and being guided by the fundamental values of equality, social justice, and sustainable development.

Supporting a network of four lecturers working in development and intercultural education, the DICE project draws on a wider community in each institution who support the work of DICE. In addition to planning and delivering courses, DICE provides continuing professional development for teacher educators, resource development in Irish and English, and other networking opportunities.

By targeting the skills, knowledge, and values of people involved in education, DICE seeks to promote global solidarity, human rights, and sustainable development, and to support people to recognise and challenge discrimination and inequality, both locally and globally.

“Development education is a dynamic and participatory process that aims to deepen people's understanding of global inequality and the interconnectedness of people and events around the world.”

Development education, intercultural education, and global citizenship education

There are many and varying definitions of development education that practitioners avail of in Ireland. Some development educators suggest that using a rigid definition anchors it in a specific point of history, whereas it is more appropriately considered a fluid process operating in a shifting economic, social, and political context. What is common to the definitions is that development education is a dynamic and participatory process that aims to deepen people's understanding of global inequality and the interconnectedness of people and events around the world.

For teaching and learning to have a development education focus, it should include multiple perspectives, critical thinking, and a link between local and global, and it should encourage action towards a more just and equal world. Development education questions political and unequal power relations between developing and developed nations and encourages us to consider our complicity in global injustice.

Recent events

Our aims are achieved through the four strands of work in our strategic plan: Teacher Education, Evaluation and Research, Spaces for Collaboration, and Engagement with Schools and Children.

- **DICE Conference 2022:**
This hybrid event considered 'Global citizenship education in a changing policy landscape'. Taking place in four locations over four days, it included 25 presentations and 400 participants from 32 institutions and organisations. The programme saw guest speakers, teacher educators, and practitioners provide a platform for meaningful discussions on global citizenship education currently, with reference to the Céim standards and the new Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy. Summary videos and graphical representations of each day can be viewed on our DICE project YouTube channel: <https://bit.ly/DICEConf22>.
- **DICE Project Video Series:**
This collection of 32 short videos introduces various topics and experiences of global citizenship education at primary level. The videos are freely available for use via our YouTube page. They are 3–6 minutes long and are presented by students, teacher educators, teachers, and DICE supporters. They address key topics such as:
 - Education for sustainability
 - Use of picture books in classrooms
 - Exploring circularity
 - Climate change

- Multilingualism
- Léann an chomhionannais agus litríocht na nóg
- Teaching resources.

Irish Aid

The DICE project is one of Irish Aid's strategic partners in the formal education sector and is funded on a multi-annual basis. Irish Aid is the Irish government's programme for overseas development. The programme is managed by a division of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

A Better World, Ireland's policy for international development, provides the framework for Ireland's expanding development cooperation programme. It charts a clear way forward to achieve our ambition of a more equal, peaceful, and sustainable world, shaping and protecting our stability, our prosperity, our shared interests, and our common future.

Contact us

We'd love to hear from you. If you want to know more about the work the DICE project does, please contact the DICE coordinator at helen.concannon@dcu.ie. The DICE Project is currently hosted by Dublin City University on the St. Patrick's Campus.

In addition to planning and delivering courses, DICE provides:

- Continuing professional development for teacher educators,
- Resource development in Irish and English,
- Other networking opportunities.

Trauma-Informed Schools

Tackling the impact of trauma on teaching, learning, and behaviour

Trauma is an important topic in the education world in Ireland in 2022, as a result of Covid-19 and the refugee crisis from the war in Ukraine. But we have always had children and adults in our schools who have experienced trauma. So what does 'trauma-informed' mean, and how does it look in practice? This article examines the types of trauma in our schools, how they manifest, and what training and knowledge are needed to create a trauma-informed school community where everyone can thrive and learn.



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Introduction

2022 has been a year when schools in Ireland have had to operate in an increasingly uncertain world. The ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, a looming world recession, and the impact of climate change have been traumatic and anxiety-provoking.

This has led to increased interest in staff training on the links between trauma, learning, and behaviour in school. At Trauma Responsive Education we are working with schools on understanding these links and using a trauma-informed lens to gain new insights and ways forward.

It should be remembered that trauma in the school population is not new. There have always been students, families, and indeed teachers who have been affected by various types of trauma, often not diagnosed or immediately apparent.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach can help schools to support any member of the school community affected by visible or invisible trauma. Essentially it aims to allow as many students as possible to have real access to and engagement in learning.

A trauma-informed approach

A trauma-informed approach involves school staff understanding the theory underlying the approach, and working together at whole-school and individual level to put the theory into practice. It does not necessarily mean that schools have to reinvent the wheel, but it might involve rethinking some common practices.

From a psychological perspective, trauma can be defined as follows:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual wellbeing. (SAMHSA, 2014, p.7)

Most people recognise that world events such as war and pandemics can cause this kind of trauma, but trauma can be defined more broadly. Schools have students in classes with experience of less public traumas, such as loss, separation, violence (in the home or community), abuse, displacement, homelessness, physical or mental illness in the family, a family member in prison, living in poverty, or simply chaotic circumstances where nothing is certain.

Recognising trauma in the classroom

The signs of trauma are not always immediately obvious in a classroom situation and can lead to students being wrongly labelled as 'lazy', 'disengaged', or 'disruptive'. It is important that staff recognise how trauma might show up in their classroom. Possible signs include:

- anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- unexplained changes in behaviour
- over- or under-reaction to sudden noises
- becoming withdrawn and not engaging
- becoming aggressive and defiant
- changes in academic performance and motivation
- increased risk-taking behaviour
- continually talking and writing about death and destruction
- inability to regulate their emotional states.

A trauma-informed school is where all the adults in the school community – administrators, teachers, special needs assistants, caretakers, and so on – can recognise these signs and respond appropriately to those who have been affected by traumatic stress.

The school recognises that a child's (or staff member's) behaviour is a developmental response to some past experience and can respond with flexibility when required. Instead of asking, 'What is wrong with this student?' and immediately labelling them, the adults ask themselves, 'What might have happened that explains this behaviour?'

Trauma affects the brain and body and thus can be a block to learning. Knowledge of the latest developments in neuroscience can help school staff understand why some students are struggling with learning and behaviour. Trauma affects a student's ability to feel safe, trust the adults in class, and settle to learn.

Trauma affects the brain and body and thus can be a block to learning. It affects a student's ability to feel safe, trust the adults in class, and settle to learn.

The brain

Recognising which part of the brain a student is operating from can offer staff insights into strategies to help them. The brain stem is the oldest part of the brain and operates at a basic survival level, defending against real or perceived threats. Students affected by trauma are easily triggered into this part of their brain, which shows up in the classroom as overreactions or sometimes aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. Triggers can be loud noises, sudden changes in routine, or simply making a mistake in an exercise. In this mode, students need help with physical regulation, for example through activities that connect to the senses, breathing exercises, or physical stress-release exercises.

Schools usually operate on the assumption that everyone is in their 'thinking brain', whereas trauma can cause this part of the brain to go 'offline'.

The limbic system, or mammalian brain, is responsible for emotions. When a student is overwhelmed by feelings, this part of the brain is over-activated. They are unable to discuss what is wrong or to name what is happening for them, making it impossible to learn. When in this mode, children need positive relationship, an adult who is attuned to them, who can name and acknowledge their feelings and get alongside them.

The neocortex is the thinking and reasoning part of the brain. Schools usually operate on the assumption that everyone is in their 'thinking brain', whereas trauma can cause this part of the brain to go 'offline'. There is no point trying to reason with a student who is not in their thinking brain. They will need support to get back into it.

Toxic stress arises when there is too much cortisol in the body, affecting the executive functioning of the brain, which is responsible for working memory, self-regulation, and organisation. Good executive functioning is essential for learning. Students who struggle with this find it difficult to remember instructions, copy from the board, recall what they have just read, motivate themselves to complete a task, and organise their work. A trauma-informed approach works on lowering cortisol to allow learning to take place.

Theory into practice

Understanding this theory can give schools a framework for thinking about children who are struggling with their learning and behaviour as a result of trauma. School itself can be a protective factor for these children, by working on the following areas:

Relationships

Providing a relationship with at least one 'good-enough' caring adult, with continual small doses of positive relationships and interactions, can change the wiring of the traumatised brain over time.

It is important to give children someone or some way to make sense of their experience, to understand why it happened or is happening. Children

need staff who can get alongside them, listen, hear, and acknowledge what is being said. This involves the skill of listening to understand rather than listening to reply and offer advice. It can feel difficult for teaching staff who want to 'fix' things, and it can feel overwhelming to hear some children's stories. Acknowledging and being able to name feelings for a student is a vital part of being trauma-informed.

Safety

Students affected by trauma need to have a sense of 'felt' and physical safety. On a physical level, this involves looking at school buildings and thinking how they might seem to anyone who is feeling vulnerable. Schools might consider, for example, what it is like to enter as a parent or carer: Are they immediately made to feel welcome? Where are they asked to sit: in a 'fishbowl' room where everyone who passes can see who is waiting, or even outside the principal's office like a naughty child? Where are the safe places, the nooks and crannies, for a student to go to self-regulate and be with an emotionally available adult?

Safe boundaries

This does not mean there are no rules in a trauma-informed school. A common misconception is that trauma-informed approaches are 'soft' and allow students to do what they want without consequences. Safety is created by having clear rules managed by calm, regulated adults who can contain and manage feelings through strong relationships. School rules need to be linked to the inclusive values and explicitly linked to safety. The question needs to be asked: In order for us all to feel safe and be able to learn and have fun, what rules do we need in here?

Safety is created by having clear rules managed by calm, regulated adults who can contain and manage feelings through strong relationships.

Predictability/Routine

Routine and predictability can minimise uncertainty and curb the need to be on high alert for danger. Plans need to be created for students who cannot manage sudden changes or transitions. This needs to be balanced with an ability to be flexible when necessary to respond to children who are having difficulties.

Connection and belonging

Feeling connected to others creates safety, decreases fear, and allows learning to take place in a group. Trauma-informed schools exploit all opportunities to emphasise connections, share experiences, and create a strong school community.

Choice

Trauma can make children feel helpless and powerless, causing them to seek to exert power in school. Without realising it, teaching staff can become drawn into unnecessary power struggles with these students, who need instead to be given choices wherever possible. Staff need to stay in the learning zone and not be drawn into the battle zone.



Fun

Having fun is very important. Through play and fun we release important hormones such as serotonin, which we need to feel calm, happy, and settled to learn.

Language

Using language positively to connect with students can have a big impact. For example, when a child is late, the difference between a negative comment ('Late again – that's the third time this week. It's not good enough') and a positive welcome ('Good to see you. Is everything all right?') makes a vast difference, especially to a traumatised child. Reframing our language about a student can also be powerful. For example, an attention-seeking child might be a connection-seeking child. Changing the language may change the approach.

Whole-school approach

Becoming a trauma-informed school is not a short-term objective to be addressed in a one-off continuing professional development event. It needs to be part of a longer-term whole-school development plan and linked with complementary initiatives. Many schools are running a range of programmes which already support this approach, such as Incredible Years, Roots of Empathy, Restorative Practice, Emotion Coaching, and Nurture Groups. Auditing current practice is a good place to start, noticing what is already being done that is working and looking at ways to improve.

Policies need to be viewed through a trauma lens. For example, some schools are moving from behaviour-management policies to relationship policies, asking: 'In order for everyone to feel safe and learn, how do we want to relate and behave towards each other?'

Real attention needs to be paid to staff wellbeing. Secondary trauma can become a serious issue, potentially leading to burnout. A trauma-informed school acknowledges this and provides opportunities to remedy it, for example through facilitated supervision for staff to reflect on the impact of their work on themselves.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has highlighted the need for schools to adopt a trauma-informed approach, but it must be acknowledged that layers of trauma have always existed in classrooms. Recognising, naming, and working with this can only be a positive step forward for the whole school community.

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Primary School Leadership – A Roadmap to Sustainability



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Network

The article details the Sustainable Leadership project of the Irish Primary Principals' Network and synthesises the findings of our research and the conclusions we have drawn. It outlines the recommendations for action that we have made, which, if implemented, will better ensure school leadership that is both effective and sustainable.

'Leadership and learning are indispensable to each another' – from the speech that John F. Kennedy was to deliver in Dallas in November 1963

Introduction

The importance of school leadership as an influence on and key determinant of pupil learning has been clearly established. The equation is simple – effective school leadership leads to school effectiveness, which in turn leads to better outcomes for children. It is therefore a priority that school leaders should be empowered and supported to deliver that effective leadership in our schools, thereby maintaining their focus on what is most closely aligned with their core purpose: leading teaching and learning.

Since its foundation over 20 years ago, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), as the professional body for primary school leaders, has provided supports and services that enable that empowerment. Those supports and services are shaped directly by our engagement with our members to ensure that they are in keeping with their needs. That direct engagement has highlighted the increasing levels of challenge, frustration, and disillusionment experienced and articulated by school leaders in response to their experience of the practice of leadership. The intensity of that frustration and disillusionment has increased noticeably in recent years and prompted IPPN to undertake this Sustainable Leadership project.

Sustainable Leadership report

The report of the project analyses the context and current reality in which school leadership is practised and experienced in Irish primary schools. Our analysis was informed by select academic literature and practitioner research. We mapped and charted the expansion of the role by detailing the tasks and responsibilities ascribed to school leaders in Department circulars, policy guidelines, and relevant education legislation. We cross-referenced those tasks and

responsibilities in the quality framework for leadership and management, as detailed in the *Looking at Our Schools* (2016) policy document. This exercise was completed before publication of the updated *Looking at Our Schools* (2022), but the domains and standards remain substantially the same. We identified which of the four domains of that framework each of the tasks and responsibilities falls into.

Our analysis was further informed by data gleaned from the 1,000+ responses to our member survey and from the Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey (2022), commissioned in partnership with our sister organisation at post-primary level, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). The data is compelling:

- The 1,000+ school leaders who responded to our survey gave an average rating of 3.96 out of 10 for the sustainability of their leadership role.
- The sustainability rating fell to 3.53 out of 10 for teaching principalship.
- 97% strongly agreed (78%) or agreed (19%) that the key issue undermining the sustainability of their leadership role is the number of tasks and responsibilities they must undertake that divert their attention away from their core purpose as a school leader.

Areas of responsibility

“ Respondents identified curriculum planning and implementation and quality assurance of teaching and learning as two of the areas of responsibility that were most closely aligned with their core purpose, but also as the top two areas for which they had insufficient time.

These responses are better understood in the context of our analysis of Department of Education circulars issued since the beginning of 2016, as well as policy guidelines and relevant education legislation with reference to the quality framework for leadership and management:

- 100% of the 162 analysed documents detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Managing the Organisation.
- Fewer than 25% of those documents detailed tasks and responsibilities for school leaders that fell within the domain of Leading Teaching and Learning.
- Tasks and responsibilities relating to Leading School Development and Developing Leadership Capacity were identified in only 18% and 14%, respectively, of the documents analysed.

This resonates with our member survey, where respondents identified *curriculum planning and implementation* and *quality assurance of teaching and learning* as two of the areas of responsibility that were most closely aligned with their core purpose, but also as the top two areas for which they had insufficient time.

The areas of responsibility they identified as least closely aligned with their core purpose – maintenance of buildings and grounds, financial management, and administrative tasks – were also the top three areas where they felt they spent too much of their time.

The Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey (2022) corroborates these findings. It identifies that the top two stressors for primary school leaders are the *sheer quantity of work* and the *lack of time to focus on teaching and learning*.

The data from this survey details the impact that the practice and experience of school leadership is having on the health and wellbeing of our primary school leaders. It reveals that the incidence of burnout, stress and depressive symptoms among Irish primary school leaders is almost double that of the healthy working population and more than double for sleeping troubles and cognitive stress. The researchers conclude:

This report presents compelling evidence that many Irish primary school leaders are struggling with complex job roles and competing job demands. Policymakers and systems administrators should engage with school leaders to identify the workload challenges that they face and provide support to enable leaders to spend time on the activities that matter most.

Our analysis has led us to conclude that the current reality in which school leadership is practised and experienced limits leadership and school effectiveness, undermines the sustainability of the role, and impacts negatively on the health and wellbeing of school leaders.

Recommendations for effective leadership

Subsequent chapters in the report explore what could better ensure school leadership of the highest quality in our schools and a leadership role that is sustainable. To that we end, we considered:

- what constitutes effective school leadership and the core purpose that underpins it
- how best to develop leadership capacity and prepare aspiring leaders for the role
- how to better ensure that recruitment identifies the most suitable candidates
- whether all school leaders have sufficient time and space to exercise both the leadership and management dimensions of their role
- how leadership can be shared and supported more effectively in schools
- how the current governance structure in primary schools is impacting on the sustainability of school leadership roles and how that structure could be reimaged.

We have considered the key issues in each of these areas and have made specific and detailed recommendations that, where relevant, identify what school leaders can do for themselves, what IPPN can do, and what the system can do to better ensure leadership effectiveness and the sustainability of school leadership roles. A broad summary of those recommendations now follows:

1. The roles of the principal and deputy principal should be clearly defined and delineated to better maintain the focus of school leadership on their core purpose of leading teaching and learning.
2. Defining these roles should be based on shared understanding of what constitutes effective school leadership in the Irish context and take account of the domains and standards detailed in the Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in *Looking at Our Schools* (2022).
3. Tasks and responsibilities not aligned with that core purpose should be redistributed, with a consequential reduction of workload.
4. To assist this there should be increased capacity for shared leadership, increased and improved administrative support, and a governance structure that is developed and formally supported and thus fully capable of discharging its compliance and oversight functions.
5. Preparation for leadership should be shaped and informed by this clearer understanding of the core purpose of school leadership and should not be generic.
6. There should be three stages in that preparation and induction:
7. pre-appointment (aspiring leaders)
8. post-appointment but before taking up the role (newly appointed principals)
9. after taking up the role (newly practising principals)
10. Relevant and specific opportunities and supports for the development of leadership capacity should be made available at each of the three stages, both formally and informally.
11. A consistent, national recruitment and appointment process should be developed, underpinned by the principles of HR best practice and supported by mandatory training for those engaged in recruitment.
12. Additional and sufficient release time for teaching principals and deputy principals should be sanctioned, to better ensure their capacity to discharge their leadership and management duties and facilitate a collaborative, co-leadership approach.
13. Administrative status as a principal or deputy principal should be provided based on the number of staff being led and managed, not the number of children enrolled in the school.
14. All schools should have access to an adequate level of administrative support provided by staff who are appropriately skilled and remunerated.
15. Greater account should be taken of the leadership demands of the different school contexts, and supports and resources should be tailored to help meet those demands – a generic or one-size-fits-all approach does not work.
16. There should be a mandatory preparation and induction programme for newly appointed and newly practising deputy principals, with access for all deputy principals to rigorous and relevant mentoring and coaching.
17. At post-primary level, the threshold for appointment of extra deputy principals has changed, reflecting the extra demands now on leadership at that level. Primary school leadership should be examined with a view to making similar provision.

18. Professional development should be provided to leadership teams to foster and embed a culture of shared leadership in all schools. This should include, but not be limited to, access for all school leadership and management teams to professional development on how to optimise collaborative practice, and the provision of team coaching.
19. A review of the role and structure of boards of management should be undertaken, as a matter of urgency, before new boards are formed in 2023.
20. A clear distinction should be made between the governance function of the board of management and the leadership and management of the school.
21. Boards should be constituted and operate in accordance with governance best practice, including, but not limited to, mandatory training for all board members, specific roles for each board member, and rotation of membership to ensure some continuity.
22. Legal, financial, human resource, health and safety, and building/maintenance expertise should be available on a cluster or regional basis to all schools or through a meso-level structure. Strategic leverage of a digital infrastructure and regional hubs could achieve this.

Conclusion

The education partners and stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that current and future school leaders are given the opportunity to be as effective as they can be in their roles, as there is a consequential impact on school effectiveness and outcomes for children. IPPN looks forward to working with those partners and stakeholders to consider and implement the report's recommendations and to better ensure the future sustainability of school leadership roles. IPPN also understands that meaningful reform and change take time, but the urgency of the need for action is clear.

It is also important to note that the Irish Principal & Deputy Principal Health and Wellbeing survey found that 'Despite the challenges of the role, many school leaders find great meaning in their work and work in schools with high levels of trust, community and sense of justice.' When asked about the positives, most school leaders emphasise the privilege of leading the teaching and learning, and their enjoyment of teaching, whether full-time for teaching principals or now and then for administrative principals. It is widely understood that it is the 'other stuff' that distracts principals in particular, but also deputy principals, from engaging with their core purpose. This is what has fostered a perception of the role as unattractive.

There is work to be done to restore balance in the discourse on school leadership. It is hoped that implementing the recommendations in this report would have such an impact.

Is Tusa an Múinteoir

Introducing peer tutoring to Irish language lessons

This article describes a research project, *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* (You Are the Teacher), that aims to create meaningful domains for primary-level children to use the Irish language and to tutor it to their peers and parents. It outlines the structure and findings of the project and concludes with reflections and recommendations.

Introduction

The most recent Chief Inspector's Report (Inspectorate, 2022) details ongoing concern about Irish-language teaching and learning in English-medium education (EME) at primary level. It identifies scope to improve the quality of pupils' learning in about one third of lessons, and it outlines the importance of fostering more engaging and enjoyable Irish-language learning experiences for students. It recommends increased focus on developing pupils' communication skills in Irish and the ability to transfer newly acquired language to different language scenarios.

In a broader sense, the lack of interactive contact with Irish for children in EME primary schools presents a key challenge. To extend Irish-language engagement beyond the classroom, for children attending either English-medium (Harris & Murtagh, 1999; Fleming & Debski, 2007) or Irish-immersion primary schools (Ó Duibhir & Ní Thuairisg, 2019), it is necessary to establish and sustain functional contexts for the use of Irish outside the school. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or partial immersion has been recommended at various junctures for Irish at EME primary schools (De Spáinn, 2016; Harris, 2008).

Is Tusa an Múinteoir project

The *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* (You Are the Teacher) project is a teacher-researcher study that aims to create meaningful domains of use for learners of Irish as an Additional Language at English-medium primary level. It is informed by sociocultural theory focusing on the social dimension of learning in the classroom and at home. Pupils are supported to act as tutors of Irish to their peers in school-based Irish lessons, and later as tutors to their parents at home.

Through a series of action cycles over the course of a school year, Irish-language tutoring and technology-mediated Irish-language learning were piloted. Twenty children in Fourth Class in a coeducational DEIS school, and their parents, participated in the



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study in partnership with the teacher-researcher. A reconnaissance cycle explored learners' experience of and attitudes towards the language, which informed a provisional project action plan. Tutoring began with reciprocal peer tutoring (PT) during Irish lessons, twice a week for 12 weeks.

Children's engagement with class-wide reciprocal PT during the first school term developed their skills as tutors and learners, which were used in the second term when undertaking Irish-language student-parent tutoring (SPT). Here, children taught their parents an Irish lesson once a week for seven weeks, and children and parents contributed to a weekly lesson evaluation. More than half of the participating families took part in a second cycle of SPT in the final term.

In addition to tutoring, technology-mediated language learning (TMLL) for Irish was piloted as part of the project. Children and parents engaged with a class online learning zone (COLZ) dedicated to Irish-language activities and a class Twitter account curated by the teacher-researcher to support class composition of Irish-language tweets. The participatory action research methodology supported child and parent voice, engagement, and agency. The project culminated with a group of children and parents sharing the emerging findings of the study at an educational conference.

Children taught their parents an Irish lesson once a week for seven weeks, and children and parents contributed to a weekly lesson evaluation.

In-class peer tutoring

The project sought to explore children's experience with the language in the daily Irish lesson as a point of departure, before developing other domains of use. The participating class identified Irish lessons as boring, with an overemphasis on textbook engagement and writing activities. Peer tutoring, an approach informed by sociocultural theory, sought to develop the child's role both as learner (tutee) and as *more knowledgeable other* (tutor).

The project title, *Is Tusa an Múinteoir*, acknowledged the significance of the child's role as tutor and their untapped capacity and agency as Irish-language learners in the communicative phase of the Irish lesson. The pre-communicative phase focussed on the teaching and learning of dedicated Irish-language structures and vocabulary to enable engagement with the peer-tutoring phase.

After each PT lesson, children reflected on their learning and how their partner helped them during tutoring. These evaluations (384 responses) showed a range of peer-mediated assistance by tutors: mainly explanation, demonstration, and practice, coupled with evidence of higher-order peer mediation such as coaching (Yarrow & Topping, 2001). The table below shows examples of children's reflections on peer assistance received during peer tutoring.

Type of Peer-Mediated Assistance

Child's Reflection

My partner helped me by:

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. Explanation | <i>Explaining what to do in activity</i> |
| 2. Demonstration | <i>Spelling something on the whiteboard</i> |
| 3. Practice | <i>In pairs we described different uniforms and shared them on board</i> |
| 4. Coaching | <i>I was saying the wrong word and my partner helped me figure out the right word</i> |

The teacher-researcher's ongoing review of the communicative phase of PT lessons showed the importance of high-quality Irish-language input in the lesson to equip learners to trial and extend their use of new and emerging Irish-language structures, and to develop their proficiency more generally in order to converse with their fellow students in Irish around the specific language activity. Peer tutoring enabled the children to develop tutoring skills, engage more actively with Irish, and build language awareness, all of which contributed to the smooth progression to student-parent tutoring of Irish in the home in the next phase of the project.

Results indicated that children were positively disposed towards peer tutoring, with most of the class recommending an increase of 2-3 peer tutoring lessons a week.

The results indicated that children were positively disposed towards peer tutoring, with most of the class recommending an increase of two to three PT lessons a week. Children's use of Irish increased over the course of the project across various domains, and most felt that their Irish competence had improved. The participatory action research methodology emerged as a crucial element, providing a mechanism for learners to both share their learning experiences and be part of the design and research.

Reflections to inform practice

The following reflections are drawn from the review of the PT phase and seek to help Irish-language practitioners in English-medium primary schools.

- While we are all aware of children's general lack of opportunity to speak Irish outside of class, a good place to start is the *Irish lesson itself* in order to (re)ignite student interest and engagement.
- Surveying or interviewing children and parents at the outset is a great way to tell them your teaching plans and engage learners in the language-learning journey.
- Rich and planned input in the pre-communicative phase is essential. What is the lesson objective? What should children be able to achieve by the end of the lesson? What Irish-language structures and vocabulary are required? How can these be taught and learned interactively in the pre-communicative phase? What resources are required for peer tutoring?
- Teachers' video review of selected tutor-tutee engagements during the communicative phase can further inform teaching or the subsequent lesson.

- Children were readily able to identify how their partner had supported their learning. Encourage this via written or oral lesson evaluation.
- The lesson evaluation enabled children to develop their language awareness. This was done through a mixture of Irish and English. While the target language is recommended, children's capacity to do this *as Gaeilge* must be built up by equipping children with the requisite language over a sustained period.
- Development of the child as the more knowledgeable other with peers is key to developing their confidence and self-assessed ability in the language.

Conclusion

The *Is Tusa an Múinteoir* project shows the potential of peer tutoring and other pedagogical approaches to support Irish-language engagement. On a practical level, peer tutoring is an adaptable and sustainable approach that could be implemented in a variety of class levels in any primary school context.

How can teachers be supported in bringing such projects to school, local, and national level? Incremental development of *communities of practice* is recommended, whereby teachers and schools develop and share innovative practice in Irish-language teaching and learning. What could also be explored is the development of communities of practice whereby Irish-language educators in English-medium and Irish-medium settings could collaborate on shared goals for mutual pedagogical and linguistic benefit.

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3 Second Level



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

Growth of the student voice:
Students are valued stakeholders in
the Irish education system.

Senior Cycle reform: We are on
the brink of systemic and seismic
change in our Senior Cycle, putting
the student at the centre of
proposed changes.

Good governance: Have we
breached the capacity of current
models for school governance?





Overview of the Second-Level Education Sector in 2022

This overview of second-level education in Ireland looks at the major themes in the sector in 2022. These include wellbeing, student voice, curricular reform, and school patronage and governance. The article asks vital questions about the future of second-level education and the shape it will take in Ireland.



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Introduction

Reflecting on 2022 in Irish post-primary schools, in preparation for writing this article, has re-energised my enthusiasm for teaching. It has reinforced for me that schools are great places, teachers do a great job, we have come far in recent years, and there exists potential at the moment for real and lasting student-centred change in our system.

In his 2005 memoir *Teacher Man*, Frank McCourt describes and reflects on his development as a teacher in New York high schools and colleges. He writes, 'In all my years at Stuyvesant only one parent, a mother, asked if her son was enjoying school. I said yes. He seemed to be enjoying himself. She smiled, stood up, said, Thank you, and left. One parent in all those years.'

Frank taught in Stuyvesant from 1972 up until 1987, and it is very interesting as we reflect on the past year in Irish education to examine our 2022 education environment in the context of Frank's experiences from 35 years ago. Was this mother's question so far removed from our current expectations for our students? Was her ambition for her son in some way unreasonable or frivolous? Would we in 2022 find this request strange? My reflections below point to the significant increase in our current focus on the students' lived experience in our schools and how our attitudes and actions in 2022 clearly support the student.

Wellbeing

As we emerge post-pandemic to engage in the new normality of Irish education, we note with interest that some of the greatest educational thinkers of our time, including Andy Hargreaves, Pasi Sahlberg, and John Hattie, have been writing in detail about wellbeing and the importance of wellbeing to educational success. There is a recognition that schools have responsibilities beyond the imparting of knowledge. Indeed, John Hattie describes wellbeing as the responsibility of everyone in the school community.

Wellbeing is high on the agenda in every post-primary school in 2022. Between providing 400 timetabled hours of Wellbeing, the never-ending discussions on what constitutes wellbeing, and the increasing desire to meet the emerging social and emotional needs of students, wellbeing is at the top of the agenda for every teacher and school leader alike.

When you meet a teacher in a social situation for the first time, it seems polite to ask them what they teach. The reply is invariably Maths, History, or some other curricular subject, when in fact the correct answer is 'students'. All teachers teach students. Teaching is relational, and the teacher-student relationship is key to learning. That has never been more evident than in the 2022 classroom, as we embed the key skills of Junior Cycle and record achievements in the classroom and in other areas of learning on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement.

The very reason for the existence of schools is to meet the needs of our students, to cater for their academic, social, pastoral, and emotional needs. In 2022, for the first time, students in all subjects have experienced the new Junior Cycle curriculum in action. Initial reactions from a University of Limerick longitudinal study are that the students like the new Junior Cycle and their new-found involvement in their own learning (McGarr et al., 2022).

Student voice

A key development in Irish education that has grown during recent years is the articulation of the student voice. We have had student councils for many years, but did we really listen to the students? That all changed when the Minister listened to the student voice on implementing the State exams in 2021. The Leaving Certificate was run in the best interest of the students as articulated by the students, and not what the system thought was best for them.

As we await the publication of the Parent and Student Charter, it is clear that the student voice will be silent no longer. Students are routinely consulted by their teachers in the classroom in relation to learning outcomes, and students are encouraged to engage in self-directed learning and to take control of their own learning journey. They have been awoken, and they are more than capable and willing to use their voice.

This, I would argue, is a real, positive move for our system. As students become more self-directed and take more responsibility for their learning, they will speak up and will challenge their environment in a positive way to develop their understanding and their learning. They become more aware of their strengths and challenges. They know their own mind, they have something to say, and we need to be ready to listen. It is great to see student representation on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), another milestone development and evidence that the student voice is central to shaping the future development of our education system.

“ The Leaving Certificate was run in the best interest of the students as articulated by the students, and not what the system thought was best for them. ”

Senior Cycle

I reflect on the closing days in March and the excitement of an announcement on Senior Cycle reform, which promises to deliver a Senior Cycle that builds on the student learning from early years into the primary school curriculum and on to Junior Cycle. We are at the beginning of something exciting, an evolutionary change that recognises the modern student of 2022. The key reforms announced for Senior Cycle have the potential to have the single greatest impact on our system and for our students.

The Leaving Cert has served us well, to a point, and while it is clear that terminal exams will have an important role in the assessment processes at the end of Senior Cycle, it is equally clear that alternative assessment modes will be used. The rationale for this has been clearly communicated, and it is to recognise the students and their many talents and strengths, and to give them every chance of success. This is as it should be. The student must be at the centre of all we do, how we do it, and what we aim to achieve. All-or-nothing terminal exams are no longer seen as in the best interest of students. We eagerly await the next steps to bring this vision for Senior Cycle to fruition.

What will Senior Cycle assessment look like? Will we need sample papers? How will students get their place in higher education? How will the CAO work? Of course the answers to these questions will all need to be worked out. As has become normal practice in 2022, consultation with stakeholders is the key, and the student voice will play a really important role in deciding the direction and distance of travel for Senior Cycle reform post-2022.

More important questions for us to reflect on, to prepare for future discussions, are: What do we want from our Senior Cycle? And what do students need from their Senior Cycle? When we know the answers to these questions, which will be achieved through professional dialogue and debate among stakeholders, consensus and clarity will emerge among decision-makers, which will ensure that the new Senior Cycle is student-centred and builds on students' previous experiences.

Junior Cycle

Learnings from the Junior Cycle must have an elevated role in our decision-making, and we must listen to the students. On the morning the Junior Cycle results were released by the State Examinations Commission in November 2022, a number of students from Firhouse Community College were interviewed on Morning Ireland. Their responses were very interesting. They spoke about how they had forgotten about the Junior Cycle results and were continuing with their Senior Cycle subjects. It came across that they had moved on.

Interestingly, some said they had forgotten about the results but that on results day they were anxious and worried about them. They shouldn't be. They should not feel judged or that their worth is questioned by their performance in low-stakes exams. How is that building their confidence and their self-esteem, when they already have their eyes on the next prize? This student feedback must shape our thinking for the future direction of our Senior Cycle, to ensure there is continuity of thought between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle.

In 2022, it is fair to say that schools truly endeavour to put students at the centre of all they do. However, recent revelations following a radio documentary have shocked many post-primary schools. Current child safeguarding procedures operate to protect students, keep them safe, and give them every opportunity to fulfil their full potential in school. The current procedures and oversight give us confidence that these historic issues of abuse would not happen in our schools in 2022.

Governance, patronage, and ethos

The recent chief inspector's report, however, does highlight a significant area of school governance to address going forward. The operation of boards of management in a voluntary capacity is unlikely to be sustainable into the future, he has written. This serious concern requires action and will dominate stakeholder engagement in future years. Central to this debate for 2022 are questions about the role of students in the management of schools: Should students have representation on boards of management? How can the student voice be placed on a statutory footing?

Closely aligned to the governance of schools is the role of the school patron and the school ethos. We operate three sectors at post-primary level, with different patronage models. All students follow a national curriculum, working towards national certification in the Leaving Cert. I think it is fair to say that the common curriculum and national certification are unlikely to change in the new Senior Cycle. But is the student experience different in schools with different patrons?

This question relates back to the ethos of the school. At the recent launch of Education and Training Boards Ireland's (ETBI) Patrons' Framework on Ethos, Professor Anne Looney, dean of education in DCU, spoke of the children's song that is regularly sung on buses: 'Everywhere we go / People always ask us / Who we are / And where do we come from.' The significance of this song cannot be overestimated in schools in 2022. It speaks to connectedness, a sense of belonging, and an intense pride in your community or school.

Surely this sense of belonging and connectedness is central to the ethos of every school? It brings us back to the relational point: seeing the person

“The operation of boards of management in a voluntary capacity is unlikely to be sustainable into the future, writes the chief inspector in his recent report.”

that is the student, putting the student at the centre of everything we do in schools, giving them opportunities to succeed, and being the wind beneath their wings. The ethos of the school must wrap around the student to support their learning regardless of school type or patronage.

Teaching in 2022 is very different from teaching in 1987, and this brings me back to Frank McCourt's experience teaching in New York compared to our current experience. It is my belief that in 2022 students enjoy school, they embrace the challenges in school, and there is a very different student-teacher relationship. The student is a valued stakeholder in 2022 and is actively involved in directing their own learning. We saw this when students didn't want to stay home despite rising cases of Covid-19 in December 2021. Students wanted to go to school because they enjoy school. This is a big positive for Irish education in 2022, and we should be proud that this is our direction of travel.

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It is my belief that in 2022 students enjoy school, they embrace the challenges in school, and there is a very different student-teacher relationship.



Mobilising Teacher Leaders as Policy Translators



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This article explores the experience of a middle leader as policy translator and showcases how teacher leaders can agitate for change in schools. The article has a focus on policy change in literacy, but the process remains essentially the same for any teacher or middle leader looking to mediate change and to translate national policy to meet local needs.

Introduction

This article explores the experience of a middle leader as policy translator in St Oliver Post Primary School, Oldcastle, County Meath, and showcases how teacher leaders can agitate for change in schools. While the article has a focus on policy change in literacy, the process remains essentially the same for any teacher or middle leader looking to mediate change and to translate national policy to meet local needs.

School self-evaluation was made mandatory in Ireland in 2012. This dovetailed with the publication in 2011 of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People. It is then that I began to look at literacy. I was an English teacher, but my motivation to look at literacy was not money or prestige; it was personal curiosity, albeit a curiosity fuelled by the publication of the national strategy.

It's at this juncture that my journey began: collating hard data, generating soft data, analysing statistics, and identifying underperformance. Although there was no formalisation of the role, the school supported my endeavour, allowing me to conduct a scoping exercise and generating discourse about literacy. The scoping exercise gave us greater clarity on the school's needs. In 2018 there was a restoration of posts at middle management level, and I was appointed to assistant principal II, with curricular responsibility for literacy.

School leader autonomy

The appointment of a middle leader with strategic responsibility for literacy represented a significant systemic change. While the change was informed by national priorities, autonomy is given to schools on the prioritisation of strategic areas for middle leadership positions. Schools must engage in a review to consider their leadership needs

and strategic priorities. The scoping exercise ensured that all staff were making informed decisions when prioritising literacy as an area of strategic responsibility, warranting a middle leadership position.

Harris and Jones (2012) explore the extent to which middle leaders are given the autonomy and responsibility to shape their position. Senior leadership trusted me to make decisions about how best to apply my own, specialist expertise to deliver a customised fit for our school. This type of autonomy requires a shift in power: senior leaders must be willing to 'let go', place their trust in their middle leaders, and be willing to authentically distribute leadership (Preedy, 2016). When this happens, we have a synergy, and middle leaders can make a 'powerful contribution to secondary-school improvement' (Gurr, 2019, p.136).

In my school, senior leadership gave me the autonomy to broker a role and mediate systemic change. There is vast potential to contribute beyond the school. Moving from one who studies policy to one who seeks to influence its practice is an emergent area for me. The Centre for School Leadership and my regional Junior Cycle Implementation Support (JCIS) have been integral to supporting the mobilisation and helping me to share the practice.

Using classroom data

My middle leadership role is very much connected to my classroom. It is this that has given integrity to the process, because it's here that I began profiling students and assessing their levels of literacy to establish baseline data. This data has informed our literacy plan of tiered supports across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

“The appointment of a middle leader with strategic responsibility for literacy represented a significant systemic change.”

Firstly, our primary level of supports. Upon a pupil's entry to the school, and each term thereafter, I use screening software to gather their reading attainment levels. Computer screening systems report student scores, comparing them to national norms, but I wanted to translate the data to compare our students against our school's norms and to measure scores against our class norms. All learners and parents get their child's reading score, the class average score, and the year group's average. Reporting in this way gives reassurance to students and parents and helps them make sense of the data.

Learning about learning

Integral to the learning is engaging in discourse about the data, acknowledging the diversity of our students, and normalising it. Reporting on results has been informed by our students: they want to see their results and be able to compare them to their class's average. The reporting is very much scaffolded in positivity and endorses the principles of the Junior Cycle, of managing oneself. Examining the data helps learners explore their attitudes to their own attainment and that of others, acknowledging there

are many challenges and barriers to learning. Students begin to learn why they might be struggling with other subjects, and it helps them make sense of their frustrations.

I show learners how to improve and set realistic targets for themselves. This is informed by the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986). The theory is shared with students: that good readers read more, causing them to become even better readers. Conversely, poor readers are less likely to read for pleasure, so it is more difficult for them to improve. This helps all learners understand that rates of improvement are relative.

Reassessment takes place each term, and the results are discussed individually with students, alongside data from their reading records, word counts, and time spent reading outside of school and in school. This helps students make sense of their results and see the symbiotic relationship between participation and progress. The learning about literacy takes place during class time in Literacy. This course is a locally devised Junior Cycle 100-hour short course studied by all our Junior Cycle students.

I show learners how to improve and set realistic targets for themselves.

I used the screening data to inform the development of Literacy for Life and Learning. It was approved by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as a Junior Cycle level 3 course in 2018. Central to the course is the balancing of knowledge and skill. Students learn that while literacy is a skill, and reading is a skill for life, they need the knowledge to understand how to improve. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Lynch, 2021) is used to teach students that when they stretch their reading just a little beyond their capabilities, they are at a point of maximised progression. Implementing this concept relies on the school's graded library, because students need to be able to select a book within their ZPD to maximise their growth.

Applying the strategy

Staff participate in bespoke, annual in-school training to review the literacy data, record it, and use it to inform teaching and learning. Sharing scores with staff helps us keep up to date with the school's changing needs and to differentiate our practices. For example, when I'm in English class, I know that the reading range spans nine years from weakest to strongest. When I use questioning, I tailor the language of the question and higher-order requirement to suit the student's ability. When I report on learning, I use the screening data to give a more accurate reflection on a student's progress relative to their ability. It is invaluable when reporting to parents and setting realistic targets.

Moving the data to shape secondary-level supports involves filtering it to see the 1st and 2nd years who have a reading age below eight, between eight and ten, and then making referrals to the special education needs (SEN)

department. The SEN coordinator uses the data to shape interventions for all students referred.

To further screen, I use the literacy class to administer the English standardisation test PPAD-E, a screening and diagnostic tool that assesses literacy skills across five subtests: word reading, spelling, reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing samples. I aggregate the scores to ensure that the tests are identifying the same at-risk students. The combined scores allow the SEN department to plan a more tailored response to student need; for example, where a student is identified as being a weak reader, they may also need a spelling intervention. The data also informs the requirements for more specialist staff training in evidence-based programmes to deal with the broader components of literacy.

In the last year, the strategy has moved to looking at tertiary levels of support. Interventions at tertiary level address multiple issues that affect student success. Central to this has been generating an integrated model of data presentation. The model helps us to look further at how we use cross-sectoral screening reports to track longitudinally and measure individual performance from 1st year through to 6th year.

Our data profiling system for each student shows scores for literacy, general ability, specialised diagnostic tests, and house exam and state exam results. The aggregated data set is helping us now to look at student progression, but in the future it should inform us on the adequacy of the core curriculum, and on the effectiveness of instructional and behavioural strategies in a school when we combine it with attendance data and other risk factors.

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Experience of Junior Cycle Shedding a Light on Senior Cycle



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Recent years have seen much change in our second-level schools. It is timely to reflect on what can be learned from our experience of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, and surveys by the ASTI provide important insights on that experience. This article draws on teachers' unique perspectives in those surveys to shed light on how best to implement change at second level.

Education is a social and economic good. It enables our students to socialise; to develop key life skills; to live healthy, balanced lives; to develop the capacity to reason; to understand their society and other societies; to know their history and that of others; to become engaged in critical thinking about the world they live in; to become active citizens; to understand how decisions are made – and challenged; perhaps to discover a life-long interest in a subject of study; and to respect the role that arts and the humanities play in our interior lives, especially in a world of TikTok and Instagram.

In short, education constitutes a dynamic interplay of social, physical, intellectual, economic, and cultural imperatives. To understate things, it is complex, and understanding that complexity ought to be an essential aspect of any change process at second level. Recent years have seen much change at Junior Cycle in our second-level schools. Whether these changes merit being called reforms, history will decide. Nonetheless it seems timely to reflect on what can be learned from our experience of the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle.

From the beginning, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) has monitored the process of implementing the Framework and its impact on the work of students and teachers. We have completed regular surveys of our members, offering them the opportunity to air their professional views and concerns and assessing their experience of the implementation and subject specifications. These surveys include Teachers' Voice (2013), Survey of English, Business and Science Teachers on CBAs, SLARs and Assessment Tasks (February 2018), Teachers' Experience of Inservice for Junior Cycle (October 2018), and the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle (January 2022).

This body of work by the ASTI is significant on a number of levels – not least because it is the only real-time record of teachers' experiences of implementing enormous change. It is to be hoped that the Minister will study what we have learned from the introduction of Framework work on how (and how not) to approach further change at second level.

Several key strands emerged in these surveys. Teachers could see that the Framework had the potential to improve learning outcomes, and this is contrary to the narrative that later grew around teachers resisting change. Teachers did raise concerns from the start which, in retrospect, are quite prophetic. Given their understanding of the complexity of the school system and the need to plan change thoroughly, teachers were correctly cautious about the time frame for implementing the Framework, believing that meaningful change can only occur over a reasonable time period.

Added to this, the context of change was given insufficient consideration. Successive austerity budgets and cutbacks in education – reduced staffing levels, fewer resources, reductions in guidance provision, larger classes, the consequences of removing in-school management structures – did not create conducive conditions for successive innovations such as the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and school self-evaluation.

Most significantly, the increased workload and the lack of consultation led to teachers experiencing 'dissonance, demoralisation and a feeling of disempowerment' (Teachers' Voice 2019). These legacy issues in the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle have had a negative impact on the attractiveness of the teaching profession, as evidenced by the growing recruitment and retention crisis we are experiencing in schools throughout the country.

“The increased workload and the lack of consultation led to teachers experiencing 'dissonance, demoralisation and a feeling of disempowerment'.

Throughout ASTI's engagement on the Framework for Junior Cycle, teachers have been very clear on the importance of retaining the externally assessed Junior Certificate examination as a trusted and valued form of assessment. As teachers, we regularly assess our students, but we know that this is complemented by assessment for State certification being externally set and marked. It is a trusted and valued system and allows for real comparability of standards. This is an important part of ASTI policy and an absolute red line for our members.

Curricular revision and redevelopment are necessary – this is nothing new. As the body of knowledge, discovery, interest, and technology advances, so too the curriculum must adapt. However, as our experience of the Junior Cycle Framework's new subject specifications grew, so too did teachers' concern over each subject's depth of treatment, and this was a recurrent theme in our January 2022 survey of 2,981 teachers. 40% of respondents disagreed that the subject specifications contained an appropriate balance between knowledge and skills, while only 35% agreed. It says much about teachers' uncertainty about the specifications that 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Open questions in the survey allowed the ASTI to access a rich seam of qualitative data, including teachers' perceptions of the new subject specifications. The following comments give a flavour of those perceptions.

The specifications for my subject are too vague.

I am concerned with the watering down of skills and knowledge that the new Junior Cycle has introduced.

Perhaps most starkly, one teacher commented:

My subject has been dumbed down – I am no longer confident that I am teaching correctly.

Volume of content and its impact on depth of treatment emerged as another theme in this survey. Teachers felt that the volume of content in the new specifications left little time for real student engagement with the subject, leading to a 'dumbing down' impact. It was clear from responses that the introduction of common-level papers for non-core subjects also had a negative effect on learning and preparation for Senior Cycle, with 78% disagreeing that the subject specifications support progression to Senior Cycle.

In the context of reviewing Senior Cycle, the ASTI commissioned Dr Brian Fleming to do independent research on the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The results were published in 'Making Education Policy Work' (2019). Acknowledging the importance of setting realistic time targets, Fleming emphasises several features that are crucial to encouraging transformative change in teaching and learning. He speaks of the need for a clear and shared articulation of the principles of change, the importance of building capacity in schools before implementing change, and the significance of recognising that change needs to be incremental rather than radical. Allied with the recognition of how teachers' workload has intensified over recent years, these key findings have great relevance for any further proposed change.

Teachers felt that the volume of content in the new specifications left little time for real student engagement with the subject, leading to a 'dumbing down' impact.

In tracing how best to form and deliver policy, Fleming gives the history of the development of two policy implementation models – the top-down view, whereby government Ministers make policy decisions and practitioners simply implement them, and the bottom-up view, which acknowledges the necessary input of practitioners.

The former sees implementation as a matter of course, whose success can be judged by performative measures. This was largely the approach taken to introducing the Framework to Junior Cycle and, in short, it was not a success. Despite bypassing recommendations by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and announcing wide-ranging changes to Senior Cycle in March 2022, it is to be hoped that the Minister will come to see that top-down policy development has limited chances of success.

It is therefore unsurprising that Fleming emphasises teacher agency as central to any change process in schools. Teachers are probably the first to recognise what is happening on the ground and in the lives of our students.

We are tuned in to them intellectually and emotionally like no other group of professionals – this is our everyday working life. Thus, we are in a unique position to inform any redevelopment of the curriculum, because our voice is that of the reflective, experienced, professional practitioner.

It is important to note that the voice of teachers is different from that of other stakeholders. Teachers understand their subject areas and, more importantly, know what works in the classroom to support their students' learning. Engaged rather than ignored, the voice of the practitioner can offer great insight into any change process in schools and ought to be at the heart of any proposed change.

Two final thoughts on the implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The first is that there are many lessons to be learned and we hope that the Minister, before making definitive changes, would reflect on the serious body of work that the ASTI has compiled on teachers' experience of Junior Cycle.

The second point refers to what it is hoped we don't have to learn from our recent experience. During the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers made the difficult decision to involve themselves in calculated and predicted grades. We did this because the alternative was to leave our students in stasis. It would, however, be a serious mistake to interpret the decision we made during the global pandemic as a weakening of our policy on external assessment for State certification.

Assessing our own students for State certification is directly contrary to the relational style of teaching which our society values so highly. When we teach, we say to our students that if they make mistakes, we will help and guide them. We are their advocates, and so much of what we do is based on that relationship. We can't be advocates and judges, and that is why we cannot accept the Minister's intention that we would be involved in assessing our own students for State certification. We are not simply saying no, but rather are defending a value which we, as the practitioners on the spot, know to be of immeasurable worth.

The voice of the practitioner can offer great insight into any change process in schools and ought to be at the heart of any proposed change.



Follow the (Teacher) Leader

A tale of formal and informal leadership development



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Much has been made in recent years of the importance of having formal mentoring structures in schools for teachers, and of the need for teachers to complete formal leadership courses. This article explores the importance of developing leadership skills both formally and informally. It also delves into the idea of building friendships within the school environment which can then lead to mentoring friendships.

Gaining confidence to become a teacher leader

Nowadays everything seems to be represented by acronyms, abbreviations, or emojis. Consequently, I was apprehensive when I received an email in October 2021 with the subject line 'STEAM in Action'. My first thought was: What is STEAM? Is it just an additional letter in the more common acronym STEM? However, when I delved further into the world of STEAM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics – I was impressed at what I found and the research that had been done in this area.

Each year, in the numeracy group in school, we endeavour to introduce novel ideas and initiatives. The aim is to help the entire school community engage with numeracy, not just in the context of the maths classroom but across all curricula and all areas of school life.

With this idea of introducing a new initiative, I began looking into research papers based on the topic of STEAM and also referenced the Junior Cycle For Teachers webpage. Being truthful, I hadn't practised such research work since my undergraduate studies. In recent years it was not something that I implemented into my practice, through lack of time or not feeling like it would benefit my teaching.

Furthermore, earlier in my career I was not confident enough to relay exciting new ideas and lead them, so I was of the mindset that it would not have been a worthwhile exercise. I am someone who has led in other areas of life – sport, friendships – but never felt confident enough to fully lead in my work and school context. This stemmed from my own self-belief and feelings of being judged for ideas that I may put forward.

Study and training

At the time, I had completed the PDSL (Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership) and was in the latter stages of the MESL (Masters of Education in School Leadership). Throughout this two-year journey, unbeknownst to myself, I had gained a great deal of knowledge and confidence in my own leadership abilities and my self-belief. I realised that, through being mentored by more experienced teachers in my school and by other teachers on the courses I have completed, I had gained confidence in my abilities and, in particular, in my development into a teacher leader. Angelle and DeHart (2011) exemplified teacher leadership as sharing knowledge of pedagogy and classroom management with colleagues, being willing to accept leadership opportunities when asked, and routinely stepping beyond required teaching duties to serve students and the school.

While all six modules that I studied in the PDSL helped me gain and learn worthwhile leadership knowledge, there were two modules that I related to best and took the most out of: 'Building Culture, Capacity and Teams' and 'Mentoring and Coaching'. Why? Honestly, they made me reflect on my own experience of teaching, how being part of a team and working together in a team are two completely different things. They made me ponder my experiences of being a mentor and being mentored. Also, the importance of trust, communication, having a role, and being able to share opinions were all things that I learned to be key factors in building a strong team.

Research and relationships

“All of the school leaders in my study stressed how important a mentor is, and how having a deep-rooted friendship with that person adds to the level of trust and honesty between them.”

With all of this in mind, I chose to look further into two areas for my thesis for the completion of the MESL: the importance of being in a team and mentoring. I chose to explore school leadership in Ireland – the influence of involvement in camogie, Gaelic games, and ladies' football, at an elite level, on the daily practices of school principals. This was something that always interested me, but I would never have looked at it through the perspective of a researcher: Does being involved in these sports benefit school leaders?

One of the major findings in my research was that involvement in these sporting arenas allows deep-rooted friendships to be forged and informal networks to be built up. These are relationships that assist leaders when they need advice, support, or just someone to talk to. All of the school leaders in my study stressed how important a mentor is and how having a deep-rooted friendship with that person adds to the level of trust and honesty between them.

The idea of informally developing leadership abilities came up repeatedly. This was something I had never thought of. I have been involved in sport from a young age and had never reflected on the skills I had developed through my involvement: administration, organisation, management of

large groups of people, dealing with pressured situations, and showing leadership.

STEAM in school

This brings us back to the topic I mentioned briefly at the start: STEAM. Using the skills I had developed throughout my studies, and having researched STEAM, I returned to the group with this idea of introducing a STEAM-based topic to one class group and using their findings to guide the direction of the initiative.

In the numeracy group there were two other teachers who had greater experience than I did. But when I approached them they were extremely supportive and great at offering informative feedback and support. This was instrumental in empowering me to bring the idea to the principal, who allowed me to go forward and guide the initiative. It was entitled 'How can Ireland and Roscommon Meet Energy Demands in a More Sustainable Way?'

Students in third-year geography and science classes investigated the sustainability of meeting energy needs in County Roscommon. Research was carried out and found that wind energy was one of the most sustainable ways to meet increasing energy demands. In the third-year maths class, students looked at the geometry of wind turbines, and in the physical education class, students went on a 10-kilometre hike around a local wind farm.

After these activities they were asked how they felt the school could be more sustainable in its energy needs. The answer was simple: Cut down on 'vampire energy' (Chan, 2011). This is when devices are left on standby and use small amounts of energy even when plugged in. Laminated cards were placed in every classroom, and an email was sent every Friday to remind teachers to plug out all devices possible.

Any teacher can be a leader

From reflection, I believe that making the first leap and going forward with your idea can be the hardest part of the process – fear of being shot down or not feeling that your idea is worthy enough. Completing my studies in educational leadership enabled me to gain greater confidence in my skills – those skills that I had developed both formally and informally. Then I wasn't afraid of putting my idea to my colleagues or of not feeling good enough.

I believe this can be something that prevents teachers from all experience levels from going forward with ideas. Any teacher can be a leader within their classroom and within their school. You don't have to have the formal middle

“ I have been involved in sport from a young age and had never reflected on the skills I had developed through my involvement: administration, organisation, management of large groups of people, dealing with pressured situations, and showing leadership. ”

or senior leadership position. It is all about having confidence in yourself and feeling supported by those around you, your trusted colleagues. Don't feel like you can't instigate or lead an initiative. Ask, plan, introduce, ask for help again if needed, and review.

For any younger teachers embarking on their teaching journey, there are mentoring programmes now in place to make the transition into the world of teaching easier. But it is also worth remembering that you can be mentored by anyone, and that getting involved in initiatives in drama, music, or sports is one of the best ways to get to know students, and colleagues, outside the classroom. Some of the best mentors and friends I have made over the years are from schools where I helped out in extracurricular activities. I became more acquainted with them outside of the four brick walls of the school.

Going forward into this new school year, as I continue in my teaching journey, I feel revitalised in my career. I have a new-found purpose. I may not have a formal leadership position in my school, but that does not mean there are not lots of exciting initiatives and ideas that I can bring forward to my own classroom in my subject area of science, and to the wider school community. According to Hunzicker (2017), teacher leadership in today's schools is essential, whether teacher leaders hold formal titles and official positions or simply step up when needed. Wenner and Campbell (2016) called this 'an important component of school reform' (p.2).

It would be easy to continue to do what I have always done, but personally I love a challenge – something new and exciting to research, plan, and implement. Teaching is essentially all about enriching students' lives, making them better so that they progress in life. As a teacher and a teacher leader, if I can continue to do this, then I will continue to be happy in my profession.

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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

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From Policy to Practice: Education for Sustainable Development through the Lens of Looking at Our School 2022

Using the Take 1 Programme approach in
learning and teaching



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This article outlines the recent policy developments in the formal education space at post-primary level in Ireland, reflecting a global citizenship perspective. It examines the implementation of these policies and the achievement of their objectives and outputs, using the Take 1 Programme training and resources. It highlights the programme's capacity to support a whole-school approach of Education for Sustainable Development, which celebrates collaborative engagement and is inclusive of all learners.

Introduction

Over the past 12 months, we have been experiencing and emerging from national and international crises, from a global pandemic to a war in Ukraine, and adjusting to all of the related and peripheral challenges that have impacted us personally and collectively. Educational developments which had been paused since 2020 are now coming on stream, with some being influenced by events from recent years. Global citizenship in particular has been redefined, and through various commitments we have witnessed a firm purpose to recognise and enhance the important impact of education on empowering learners to address these interconnected challenges (United Nations, 2015).

In June 2022 the 2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development was launched by Ministers from the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). This engagement by three government departments, with education as part of their remit, shows a collective determination to achieve the objectives outlined in the strategy.

Building on the successes of the first Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) strategy, the second strategy provides a framework 'to steer and support the contribution that the education sector is making and will continue to make towards a sustainable future by 2030' (Government of Ireland, 2022). Aligned to it is a comprehensive implementation plan with a detailed roadmap to the planned engagement and actions shared in the strategy. It reflects the continuum of learning from early childhood to third level, and it acknowledges the learning that takes place in communities, youth groups, and other non-formal environments.

Looking at Our School 2022

In August 2022, the Department of Education issued the latest iteration of Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education, 2022a). Designed for teachers and school leaders as a framework to enhance the quality of learning and teaching, and leadership and management, it is also intended to be used by schools as they engage in self-evaluation (SSE).

The text in this framework largely reflects the approach of the 2016 publication, but it also considers issues and challenges that have impacted education since then. Reflecting greater cohesion across the formal education sector, Looking at Our School (LAOS) supports the holistic nature of student needs and the broader aspects of learning and teaching, including those 'that became all the more significant as schools responded to the needs of their students in the context of COVID-19' (ibid., p.6).

One area seen as a focus of development has been that of learning, teaching, and engagement aligned to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). LAOS 2022 makes explicit reference to sustainability and reflects both student capacity and values and policies at management level.

In the Learning and Teaching dimension, Domain 1: Learner Outcomes, we see new text that recognises students as 'key contributors to our sustainable future', and through the curriculum their understanding of ESD and global citizenship issues is developed to enable them 'to act responsibly for a more sustainable world' (ibid., p.27). In Domain 2: Managing the Organisation of the Leadership and Management dimension, new text in the statements of effective practice ask that a school 'values and promotes a commitment to sustainable development and implements practices and policies that embed the principles of sustainability in the daily routines of the school' (ibid., p.38)

Standards	Statement of effective practice	Statement of highly effective practice
Students demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the post-primary curriculum	Students are recognised as key contributors to our sustainable future. In line with the curriculum, their understanding of environmental, social and economic issues and of active citizenship, with the associated rights and responsibilities in local and wider context is being developed. They are enabled to act responsibly for a more sustainable world.	Students are recognised as key contributors to our sustainable future. In line with the curriculum, their understanding of environmental, social and economic issues and of active citizenship, with the associated rights and responsibilities in local and wider context is being developed. Students are enabled to contribute positively, actively and compassionately towards the creation of a more sustainable and just world.

Figure 1: Statements of practice – Learning and teaching. Domain 1: Learner outcomes. *Looking at Our School 2022* (Department of Education, 2022a)

Standards	Statement of effective practice	Statement of highly effective practice
Manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice.	The school values and promotes a commitment to sustainable development and implements practices and policies that embed the principles of sustainability in the daily routines of the school.	The school prioritises and promotes as a core value , a commitment to sustainable development; the school community collectively develops and implements practices and policies that embed the principles of sustainability in the daily routines of the school.

Figure 2: Statements of practice – Leadership and Management. Domain 2: Managing the organisation. *Looking at Our School 2022* (Department of Education, 2022a)

Take 1 Programme

The Take 1 Programme supports and enables the objectives of LAOS and the 2nd National Strategy on ESD, translating them from aspiration to action. Developed at Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) in 2019, it is an excellent example of an approach to learning and teaching about sustainability and global citizenship education, which is built in to the learning outcomes of the Junior Cycle curriculum.

Targeting post-primary senior leaders, initially in the Education and Training Boards sector, the Take 1 Programme introduces participants to ESD and then guides them through a process of embedding engagement through subject syllabuses. The training programme highlights how every student in every class, through every subject, can experience the interdependent nature and impact of ESD.

Following Take 1 Programme training, participants are encouraged to put their understanding into action in in-school activities. Take 1 Week, usually occurring annually in late November, is an opportunity for a comprehensive demonstration of engagement, where teachers are invited to teach one class group one lesson about one Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), over the course of one week. Activities can occur in the formal, non-formal, or informal school community and can demonstrate ongoing actions or the start of the school's ESD journey.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

May Day for Sustainability offers the same opportunity during a single-day event, taking place in early May. Because of the embedded nature of the programme resources, however, learning and teaching about ESD can take place at any relevant stage of the subject syllabus throughout the school year.

School actions and activities

Since the programme's launch in 2019, post-primary schools have engaged in actions and activities aligned to the breadth of the SDGs in a range of focused and whole-school approaches. The following summaries provide a sample.

Sustainable Development Goals and everyday life in Roscommon Community College

Targeting post-primary senior leaders, initially in the Education and Training Boards sector, the Take 1 Programme introduces participants to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Since the launch of the Take 1 Programme, Roscommon Community College (RCC) has been committed to embedding the SDGs across the curriculum. Closely aligned with their involvement in the WorldWide Global Schools and Green Schools programmes, they work hard to make students more aware of the importance of ESD and how the SDGs link to their everyday lives.

They are developing the biodiversity area to the rear of the school to create an active learning space and promote a culture of sustainability in the school that students and staff alike are proud of. Linking to SDG 15: Life on Land, the Learning for Life Class have reintroduced hens to the forest, and Civic, Social and Political Education classes have increased areas for pollinators through various planting initiatives. Supported by Coillte, they planted 100 native Irish trees to increase the size of the woodland, and Agricultural Science classes have planted potatoes for an autumn harvest. An SDG pathway of signs in English and Irish has been created along the corridor in the main school building, so the entire school community and visitors can see them daily.

Third-year students created a video linking the SDGs to everyday life in RCC and were amazed at how many examples they found. SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production is seen in action as rainwater is collected at the side of the school and used to water the flowers in the woodland and the flowers and vegetables in the polytunnel. Regular fundraising initiatives take place throughout the year, linking to Goal 1: No Poverty, while the LGBTI+ and allies group worked to promote Goal 5: Gender Equality and Goal 10: Decent Work and Economic Growth, helping the school to become accredited by Belong To as a Safe and Supportive School (Clancy, 2022).

Transition Year student Seán Allen had national success at SciFest and the BT Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition with his project investigating how to find a more sustainable and cost-effective method of keeping nutrients in the soil. Seán will continue this project in Fifth Year ahead of

the SciFest finals in November. This project has numerous practical SDG links, particularly Goals 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities and SDG 15: Life on Land. Meanwhile, Third Year students Bailey, Cian, and Aaron spent the year examining air quality around the school, measuring NO2 levels and investigating the factors that affect air quality, linked to Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, Goal 13: Climate Action, and Goal 14: Life Below Water.

Engagement with education for sustainable development continues to grow in Roscommon Community College, and they are proud of the culture of sustainability which is growing in the school, helping the entire school community to become active global citizens.

Limerick and Clare Education Board – community-wide engagement

Earlier in 2022, in a demonstration of collaborative engagement with ESD, Gina O'Connor from Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board organised an orienteering event as part of a countywide engagement emphasising SDG 15: Life on Land – and availing of an opportunity to work with communities and organisations outside of the school sector. The event was supported by the Burren and Kilfinane Outdoor Education Centres.

Over 500 students from post-primary schools in Limerick and Clare went to Curraghchase Forest Park in County Limerick, a fantastic amenity covering 313 hectares of mixed woodlands, park land, and lakes that provide a rich habitat for a diverse range of animals and plants. Three separate orienteering courses were set out, with students competing in pairs. Conscious of living the spirit of SDG 15: Life on Land, the organisers promoted the message of 'leave no trace', ensuring that participants minimised their impact on their environment by encouraging a 'pack it in and pack it out' ethos.

Abbey Community College – our global goals journey

Abbey Community College in Ferrybank, County Waterford, was an early adopter of the Take 1 Programme approach, joining the collective of schools around the country working to embed the SDGs in learning and teaching. Their aim has been to highlight the SDGs at whole-school level, encouraging all staff, not just Junior Cycle, to make connections between SDGs and their own subject specifications and curriculums.

Take 1 Week each year has been a positive addition to their academic calendar, highlighting the work their school is already doing to raise awareness of the global goals. At the start of their journey in 2019, the school chose one SDG to concentrate on as a whole-school endeavour. As they have progressed, they now realise that almost every lesson taught in school today can be linked directly to one of the 17 SDGs. This year Abbey Community College used the Take 1 Programme to promote the message of collaboration by highlighting the power of SDG 17: Partnership for the Goals, and SDG 4: Quality Education, promoting inclusive and equitable education for all.

“ In a demonstration of collaborative engagement with Education for Sustainable Development (SDG), Gina O'Connor organised an orienteering event as part of a countywide engagement emphasising SDG 15: Life on Land.

Continuing the SDG journey outside the classroom, the school's Global Citizenship Group have produced the podcast *Student Insights*, which explores global issues through interviews and discussions with students, staff, experts, and special guests. They believe that all voices matter, and they use the motto 'Your Best Self, Our Best World'.

A lens for engagement

As these examples show, the Take 1 Programme can be applied at all levels, through all programmes, for all student cohorts. It can reflect many of the other aspirations and intentions of the LAOS framework, such as inclusion, student participation, and creativity. Influenced by the SDGs' central transformative promise to 'leave no one behind' (United Nations, 2015, p.1), its structure ensures it can reflect the need to take account of 'students' abilities, stage of development, identified strengths and learning needs' (Department of Education, 2022a, p.26) when considering the statements of practice within the domains.

“ We await the introduction of the Senior Cycle subject 'Climate Action and Sustainable Development', which responds to student concerns and interests aligned to this topic.

Aligned to the publication of an updated LAOS framework, schools will now also enter their third cycle of school self-evaluation. SSE will be used to 'identify and reflect on the impact of Covid-19' (Department of Education, 2022b, p.2) and take stock of the effectiveness of SSE to date. In this next phase, which runs from 2023 to 2026, context-specific priorities for teaching, learning, equity, and inclusion will be to the fore, as well as consideration of other national strategies, including the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (Government of Ireland, 2022).

This broad range of areas of attention are not intended to be viewed as additional layers, but rather have the potential to complement each other and, in some cases, be addressed in tandem. The Take 1 Programme provides a lens for this collaborative engagement, addressing student wellbeing, inclusion, and a responsive school curriculum, and reflecting schools as 'dynamic learning organisations' (Department of Education, 2022a, p.9).

In other curriculum developments, we await the introduction of the Senior Cycle subject Climate Action and Sustainable Development, which responds to student concerns and interests aligned to this topic. For students who will not have the prospect of studying this new subject, the Take 1 Programme provides an opportunity that can motivate and empower them to become informed, active citizens. With the capacity to complement this Senior Cycle development, the Take 1 Programme can work alongside this formal curriculum focus to highlight the interconnected nature of global citizenship.

Towards a more just and sustainable world

The issues and information encompassed in ESD are wide-ranging and potentially complex, often informed solely by media headlines. The Take 1 model engages schools, students, and teachers in a flexible learning approach, ensuring they can adopt and adapt the programme as a built-in model that can be sustained as it grows. Visual and verbal feedback has shown strong evidence of the ease with which learning about sustainability can be integrated into the whole school environment. Each teacher has the relevant information to hand – this is ensured by providing a comprehensive training model and associated resources that map the learning outcomes to the SDGs. This approach supports the attainment of indicators set out in SDG 4.7 and meets the standards for teacher professional development outlined in Cosán (Teaching Council, 2016).

This embedded approach acknowledges and embraces the importance of learning about all 17 SDGs and how their interconnected nature is vital for their continued impact and success. At national level, the Department of Education currently funds the Take 1 Programme and considers it 'an important element of its 2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development'. It works towards equipping learners with the relevant knowledge (the 'what'), key dispositions and skills (the 'how'), and values (the 'why') that will inspire them to become informed active citizens (Government of Ireland, 2022, p.17).

Internationally the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contained a pledge that 'no one will be left behind' (United Nations, 2015, p.1). It is this principle of inclusion that underpins the spirit of the Take 1 Programme, and that aspires to translate the aims and objectives of policy into the responsibilities and actions of practice towards a more just and sustainable world.

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What Can We Learn from the International Digital Educational Revolution?

The use of ICT has been embedded into all six key skills for Junior Cycle: Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, and Managing Information and Thinking. In May 2022 the Minister for Education announced the publication of the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027. It was developed after consultation with many stakeholders, including children at primary school, students at post-primary, their parents or guardians, teachers, and school leaders. This article looks at the digital infrastructure needed to realise the full potential of the strategy.



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Introduction

The Digital Strategy is ambitious and provides a comprehensive roadmap which endeavours to ensure that our school system is preparing our school communities for the modern world. The strategy has been created around three pillars:

Pillar 1: Supporting the embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning, and assessment.

Pillar 2: Digital Technology Infrastructure.

Pillar 3: Looking to the future: policy, research, and digital leadership.

It is clear from the consultation with teachers that the majority, at both primary and post-primary level, engage with the digital supports and resources available to them. These include the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI), Webwise, and Scoilnet. The Digital Strategy recognises that effective planning of digital learning is essential to ensure that schools can successfully embed the use of digital technologies across the curriculum.

The reports on the consultation that informed the Digital Strategy are available to download from the Department of Education website. The reports on the findings from the questionnaires for post-primary students and teachers are worth reading, as it is clear that the voices of stakeholders mattered (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). When asked if there was any particular area or subject that a new Digital Strategy for Schools should include, most students had no opinion or didn't know, but some responded thoughtfully.

Students asked that the strategy include coding, fast broadband, access to devices, and online safety. The data collected from teachers echoed these answers. When teachers were asked about barriers or obstacles, they reported insufficient broadband, a lack of resources for both mainstream and special educational needs (SEN), a lack of time, access to devices, and GDPR concerns.

Another question asked students if they or their fellow students have been involved in the development of any policies on the use of digital technologies in their school. Of 138 respondents, 28% answered yes. This number will grow as we look forward to seeing the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill being passed in the Dáil. The school digital policy is an important document, and it is very positive to see that the student voice has been consulted in its development.

Digital devices

There have been many studies on the student experience and engagement during the pandemic (Mac Domhnaill et al., 2021). These experiences have certainly informed the consultation. When asked about the digital infrastructure that is most important to enable the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning and assessment, teachers ranked a device for teachers as the most important, and devices for learners in second position.

Since Covid-19 we have seen a welcome increase in grant funding for digital technology infrastructure to both primary and post-primary schools. This funding is a foundation step to covering the visible and invisible cost of such an ambitious strategy. As part of the consultation, students were asked if they have access to a digital device to use in school during class when needed: 121 (85.8%) said yes, and 20 (14.2%) said no. Students reported using a mix of devices (laptops, tablets, and smartphones), but there is inequity in the classroom: only 72 students (52.9%) said that the device they were using to carry out necessary classwork was provided by school, while 64 (47.1%) said they provided it themselves.

Over the last decade we have seen an increasing number of schools operating primarily on the use of devices, usually tablets, as the primary learning resource in classrooms. In Ireland this expectation currently depends on the policy of each school (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019). Some schools provide staff with a complimentary device as part of a contract with an external technology provider. But the provision of devices to all teachers in Ireland is certainly not mandated by the Department of Education; it depends on the internal policy of any given school.

For many students, 'bring your own device' (BYOD) is still a reality, and the range of devices being used varies hugely. Schools have little control over what social media, for example, is accessed during the school day. It is much

“ **The provision of devices to all teachers in Ireland is certainly not mandated by the Department of Education; it depends on the internal policy of any given school.** ”

harder to implement a clear digital policy in this scenario (Garba et al., 2015; Dunne et al., 2020; Feerick et al., 2022). The situation also forces some families to buy their 12-year-olds a smartphone despite evidence that children under 13 can be negatively impacted by a smartphone (Dempsey et al., 2020).

Many teachers are also still using personal devices such as phones, laptops, visualisers, and Wi-Fi speakers, although this is gradually being phased out due to recent GDPR legislation (Marcus-Quinn and Hourigan, 2021; Murphy et al., 2021).

According to the latest available figures in the October Returns for 2019/2020 (returned via the Post-Primary Online Database P-POD), the number of registered post-primary students in Ireland is 371,450. This figure will likely be much higher for the current academic year, given the high number of Ukrainian students that Ireland has welcomed. If every student were to be provided with a device by the Department, it would require a much larger budget than is currently provided. But in the interests of equal access to technology, this level of support is what is required.

It is worth looking at international best practice, such as Estonia's highly regarded Tiger Leap Foundation or the later Digital Educational Revolution in Australia, and learning from their experiences. In 1997 Estonia set out to provide all schools with computers and internet as part of a broader strategy to build an information society (Aru-Chabilan, 2020; Põldoja, 2020). In 2008, the Australian federal government initiated a national policy to provide all secondary students and teachers with new and upgraded information and communication technologies. This initiative, which ran from 2009 to 2014, was to ensure that students and teachers had the same access to the digital technologies necessary to support learning, and to prepare students for full participation in future society.

Some aspects of both the Estonian and Australian programmes worked extremely well, and some were less successful (Niederhauser et al., 2018; Velmet, 2020). There are published case studies based on empirical evidence that we should be considering for the next stages of our own Digital Strategy.

Conclusion

This new Digital Strategy is our best roadmap to date for building digital skills and competencies. Devices are an attractive option for many schools, because having a tablet or laptop can negate problems that can, and do, arise with smartphones. More funding for appropriate devices for both teachers and students at post-primary level is critical if equity of the digital experience is to be achieved.

“ **52.9% [of students] said that the device they were using to carry out necessary classwork was provided by school, while 47.1% said they provided it themselves.** ”

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State Examinations throughout 2022

An unparalleled year for second-level education

This article explores the State examinations in 2022, the highs and lows, the changes and outcomes. It makes particular reference to the exam crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, grade inflation and the CAO, and of course the long-awaited Leaving Certificate reform announcement.



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Exam uncertainty and the Covid-19 pandemic

Without a doubt, 2022 was a whirlwind of a year for students sitting the State examinations. From exam upheaval to Leaving Certificate reform, it was a year filled with uncertainty. The Covid-19 pandemic was still hanging above us, and with Christmas just passed, cases were rising quickly.

Among other questions this raised was: Can the State exams go ahead? As expected, the media went haywire. The issue of State exams was everywhere – in every paper, on every social media platform, you simply couldn't avoid it. It was a discussion being had in every Irish household.

As things stood, the exams had already been given adjustments in September 2022, such as more choice on papers. Notably, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, promised that there would be 'no cliff edge for the students in terms of grade inflation' (Michael, 2022).

Meanwhile, the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations was deep in discussion. Students, parents, teachers and principals, management bodies, and government officials were all represented (Government of Ireland, 2021), and advocated on behalf of their constituencies. Surveys held by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) had 41,000 responses, and surveys by the National Parents Council Post-Primary had over 5,000; these called jointly for the State exams to go ahead in a hybrid model, similarly to those held in 2021 (NPCpp, 2022).

The Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) called for a full return to all State exams (TUI, 2022), as did the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) (ASTI, 2022). What made this year unique was that some Junior Cycle students had never sat a State exam and therefore had no experience of them, but they also had no recorded grades that could be used for standardisation. This was used as an argument both for and against a full return to exams as normal.

These discussions continued until 1 February, when Minister Foley announced what could be considered a middle ground: further adjustments to the State exams. These adjustments were widely welcomed by students, parents, and teachers alike.

2022 State exam results and the CAO

On 2 and 8 September 2022 we saw the promise of 'no cliff edge for the students in terms of grade inflation' come into practice, with the results of the Leaving Certificate and CAO issued to students. These grades, as promised, were no lower than those in 2021, but they came with their own problems.

2022 saw 84,321 students apply to the CAO. More than half of these students received their first choice offer, but many universities had to resort to random selection in allocating these places because of the high points received.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, announced additional places in high-demand courses such as Medicine and Dentistry, a welcomed move. Unfortunately, even with additional places, many students were left without offers in these subjects due to the high demand and random allocation (O'Brien, 2022).

“ On 2 and 8 September 2022, we saw the promise of 'no cliff edge for the students in terms of grade inflation' come into practice... Grades, as promised, were no lower than those in 2021, but they came with their own problems... ”

Long-awaited Leaving Cert reform

Perhaps the biggest and most unexpected announcement in 2022 was that of Senior Cycle reform. On 29 March, Minister Foley announced her ambitious plans to gradually change Senior Cycle and the State exams, to begin in 2023/24. These changes included the addition of new subjects (Drama, Film, and Theatre Studies; and Climate Action and Sustainable Development), and new curricula for the subjects currently available.

Another notable change was the revised assessment method. Subjects will be assessed using additional components worth 40% and a written exam worth 60% (Government of Ireland, 2022) – a change that education stakeholders have been seeking for years.

For all these ambitions, however, we saw a much-awaited reform of the CAO system left behind. Fifth-year students in 2023 will sit the Irish and English paper 1 exams, but there is still little information available about how this change will work. There is no doubt that these new changes are simply a starting point, not the final destination.

2022 was a notable year for education. From the impacts that Covid-19 had on the system to the announcement that changed the State exams forever, it's a year that won't be forgotten.

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'Becoming and Transforming' through Maynooth University's Turn to Teaching Project

The role of critical and diverse communities of practice in challenging and transforming teacher education



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Maynooth University's Turn to Teaching is a widening participation project that promotes diversity in the teaching profession. Funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), it is embedded within, and supported by, a community of practice of school, further education, community, and university partners. In this article we highlight the role the project is playing in generating discussion in and across the teaching profession on the systemic change required to realise a truly representative and inclusive profession.

In response to the under-representation of certain groups in teaching, and mirroring the international context, diversifying access to and participation in the teaching profession in Ireland has become a priority in education policy in recent years.

In 2016, the Department of Education and Skills launched the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 1, which provided funding for projects related to diversifying initial teacher education (ITE) for target groups in the National Access Plan 2015–2019 (HEA, 2015). The target groups specified in the PATH 1 initiative were: entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, mature students, Irish Travellers, students with disabilities, part-time and flexible learners, and further education award holders.

This article tells the story of Maynooth University's Turn to Teaching (TtT), a PATH 1 project that promotes diversity in the teaching profession through a series of social-justice-orientated widening participation initiatives. Established in 2017, TtT adopts a lifelong, continuum approach, supporting students from diverse and under-represented groups into ITE (via its Foundation Certificate and outreach work), through ITE (via undergraduate and postgraduate routes), and beyond ITE (early career); see Figure 1.

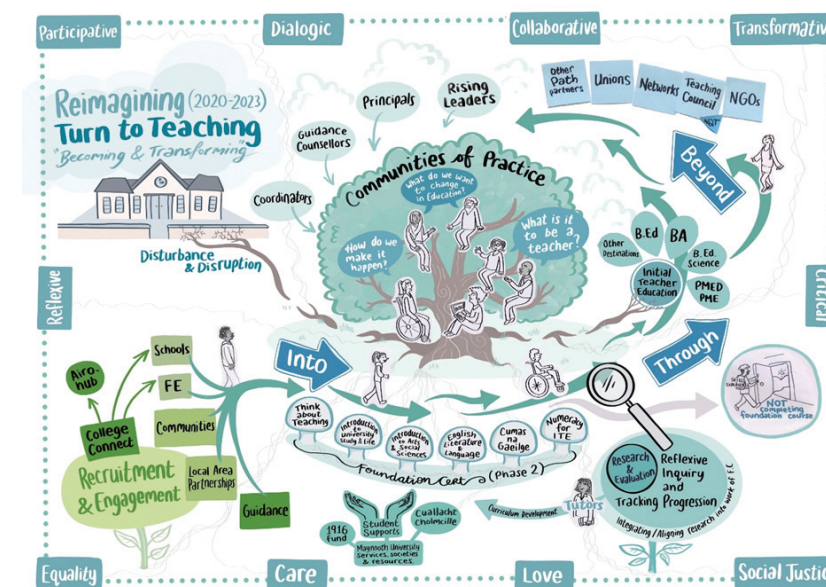


Figure 1: Turn to Teaching's vision

At the heart of the work, a level 6 programme, the Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate, was developed with the aim of providing a critically reflexive space for a diverse student group to contemplate, identify, and embark on meaningful and defined pathways towards careers as teachers in a range of educational sectors: early childhood, primary, second-level, and further education.

This work has been supported by a rich and diverse community of practice made up of teacher mentors (Rising Leaders), school staff and communities, further education partners, ITE providers, access offices, Local Area Partnerships, and other PATH 1 projects. Indeed, this article reflects that sense of community and partnership, as it is authored by a coalition of project partners (represented by Lesley Byrne) and project staff (Gareth Burns and Jerry O'Neill).

Fundamental and guiding concepts of becoming and transforming

A solid critical theoretical foundation is identified by McDaid et al. (2023) as crucial to maximising the transformative potential of teacher diversity projects. Despite its complexity, TtT is guided by two fundamental concepts: becoming and transforming. These twin objectives acknowledge the significant developmental processes that enable educational, professional, and occupational growth by participants across the various areas and stages of the project.

But the aspirations of becoming and transforming apply equally to the broader educational field. They guide the project activity to be always conscious of the work that disorientates established attitudes that contribute to reproducing inequality in relation to teacher identity, and that invites new understandings and perceptions of professionalism in education.

The work is orientated in critical educational values and practices that centre on participation, reflexivity, collaboration, love, and care. These values and practices are reflected in the programme's approaches to pedagogy, research, project management, and evaluation.

A transformative learning project

As a transformative learning project, TtT is committed to research-informed practice and project development, a principle that Heinz et al. (2023) name as critical for the development of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching profession. TtT aligns itself with a mixed-method approach to research and evaluation, which attends to tracking quantitative data and the more qualitative, reflexive, and participatory methods that allow the project to develop in ways responsive to the needs and contexts of participants but also to the broader equality and institutional sector and policy contexts.

TtT's impact is immediately evident in recruitment and progression data (Figure 2). Through its innovative Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate for ITE and its two-year school outreach and leadership programme Rising Teachers, Rising Leaders, 130+ participants have successfully completed their programmes.

The Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate has run for four years and has very high retention (86%) and progression rates (83%) into undergraduate and postgraduate ITE programmes and pathways. The

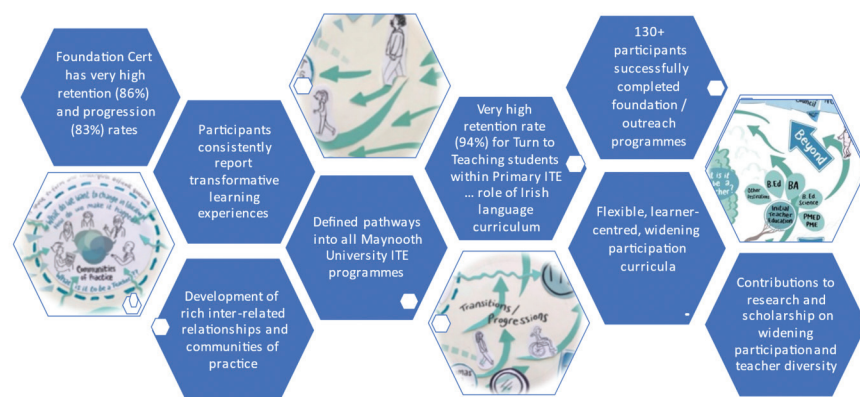


Figure 2: The story of Turn to Teaching so far

direct pathway to primary ITE created by the collaboration between TtT and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education continues to be particularly successful, and the very high student retention rate (94%) on this pathway speaks to the quality of preparation provided by the Foundation Certificate, particularly in the core competencies for entry to primary ITE, namely Irish, maths, and English.

In particular, the Irish language dimension of the work of TtT has been central to student experience and success on the primary pathway. The Irish language requirement for entry to primary ITE is an acknowledged factor in the homogeneity of the profession (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011; O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Keane et al., 2023).

In response, TtT, in partnership with Maynooth University's Lárionad na Gaeilge and Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, developed an alternative Irish language curriculum on the Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate which provides support and equivalence to Leaving Cert Irish, with student competency assessed through the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge exam framework.

Emerging project research speaks to the transformative impact the programme has on participants' experiences and perceptions of the Irish language. One Foundation Certificate student said:

I think for the Leaving Cert . . . you're taught to pass the exam and give opinions that you might not necessarily have yourself, but that's what's going to help you pass. Whereas this year [on the Foundation Cert], I've been taught how to actually formulate my own opinion using the language.

The numbers tell one side of the success story. But much of TtT's success can be traced to the work done in building trusting relationships with students and being attentive and responsive to their experiences and needs. The vast majority of TtT students have experienced complex, intersectional, and intergenerational levels of education inequality, and the integrated set of personal, financial, social, and academic supports developed by the project are critical to students' experience and success.

The importance of these supports was accentuated in the ever-shifting learning landscape heralded by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the growing recognition of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on already-disadvantaged groups that the programme supports (Aontas, 2020).

The Turn to Teaching community: creating 'messy' but safe spaces for dialogue, debate and disturbance of narratives of deficit

The work of the project has sought to challenge the deficit ideology that often positions students from under-represented groups as requiring 'fixing'. This work has been developed and supported by a diverse community

of practice made up of teacher mentors (Rising Leaders), school staff and communities, further education partners, ITE providers, access offices, Local Area Partnerships, and other PATH 1 projects.

This community of practice, which is committed to equality, diversity, and widening participation in education and teaching, has become a porous and self-sustaining space for critical reflection and dialogue which is orientated on enhancing teacher diversity and professional equity in teaching in general. At the core of our community have been the Rising Leaders, a group of teacher mentors from under-represented groups whose role in the project has grown and evolved as they have moved from being participants in the Rising Teachers, Rising Leaders school outreach and leadership programme to being associate staff in the project who are contributing through mentoring, curriculum development, and lecturing (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Turn to Teaching's community of practice

TtT's community of practice has also been instrumental in creating critically reflexive spaces for telling and retelling narratives emerging from the project's community of learners, educators, and activists (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a spirit of democratic participation, the rich life experiences that the students, Rising Leaders, and other TtT community members and activists bring with them is the starting point for personal and collective journeying through the process of 'becoming' and 'being' a teacher (Brookfield, 2017). Led by the Rising Leaders, these spaces and stories have also been a catalyst for rich conversations with student teachers across Maynooth University, focused on ways of developing inclusive, critically conscious, and culturally responsive pedagogies and classrooms.

TtT students are motivated to become teachers for different reasons, and they have a strong desire to bring their own experiences into the classroom as a critical and professional resource. Mirroring the motivation of many of the teacher participants (Burns & O'Sullivan, 2023), many student participants have a strong aspiration to be role models for their own future students, who may come from groups currently under-represented in teaching (Burns et al., 2023). This desire is expressed here by a Foundation Certificate student from an Irish Traveller background.

I saw it . . . even I just noticed . . . when I was in 4th Class or 5th Class . . . I never had a male teacher, and I never had a black teacher, it was always just, you know, women and white women . . . I don't think there's any Traveller primary teachers . . . I have never seen one . . . and I would kind of like to break the barrier in that way, and you know, show them it can be done.

Although the importance of role models in breaking through professional barriers was clear to many participants, they also nurtured a sense of criticality and a desire to transform education throughout the process. This sentiment is exemplified by another Irish Traveller student participant who clearly articulates the sense of the deeper and longer-term work that needs to be done across all of society:

We cannot expect marginalised people to thrive in mainstream society without supporting those foundations first. Dignity and respect given to these communities, and supports for their own education and self-actualisation, are a step on the way to closing the gaps between marginalised communities and mainstream society. I believe we can occupy the same spaces of education, work, and cultural spaces on the premise of mutual respect.

Conclusion

As we look to the future, the next phase of the work needs to grow in parallel with TtT students' development as they progress through ITE programmes and begin their careers as educators. This has exciting potential as the project's participants move into the teaching profession and, if they so desire, become future educational leaders in schools and other educational spaces.

But this transition from the supportive spaces of the project into a post-qualification world of education work is also an area where we envisage emerging issues of access for teachers from under-represented groups in the teaching profession. This is, in many ways, the unknown of the work, but we have concerns, confirmed in previous research (Marom, 2019; Neary,

2023), about the possibilities of difficult transitions to teaching for students from diverse backgrounds.

The TtT community of practice will be critical to developing supports and processes that will support early career transition as this community matures and becomes more autonomous. Indeed, the dialogical spaces that have flourished across the project, in response to enduring, inclusive, and 'risky' questions such as 'What it is to be a teacher?' and 'What do we want to change in education?', may be useful if sometimes uncomfortable starting points for much-needed discussion within and across the profession on the systemic change required to disrupt the intergenerational, intersectional barriers to teaching that continue to exist for those under-represented groups.

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Tackling the Legacy of Covid-19

Taking stock and moving forward

This article looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary and post-primary schools, drawing on information gathered by the Department of Education Inspectorate in its advisory and evaluative work with school communities, as well as a range of national and international studies and research papers.

Introduction

This article looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary and post-primary schools from September 2020 to June 2022. It considers a range of issues, including the impact of the pandemic on children and young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It explores how the pandemic has accelerated innovation and change in our education system, particularly in the areas of digital technologies and pupil and student participation, and it offers suggestions on how we can build on this learning for the future.

The article draws on information gathered by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education in its advisory and evaluative work with school communities. This work included Inspectorate surveys; focus groups with pupils, students, and parents; incidental (unannounced) inspections; and curriculum evaluations. The article is also informed by a range of national and international studies and research papers.

Varied use of digital technologies

The abrupt closure of schools in March 2020 resulted in an immediate redesign of teaching and learning, necessitating a new level of digital competency for teachers, pupils, and students. A range of issues, at both system and school level, impacted on schools' capacity and ability to adapt to teaching and learning in a remote environment (Inspectorate, 2020; Mohan et al., 2020).

The pandemic also highlighted the potential of digital technologies to transform teaching and learning. Many schools maintained or developed their capability in this area. Findings from Inspectorate research (Inspectorate, 2022b) show that enhanced capacity in schools to engage with digital technologies to support teaching and learning was evident across primary and post-primary schools.

In many cases, learning platforms were used very effectively by teachers to share content with pupils and students, and for pupils and students to submit samples of their learning for review. In general,



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there was a notable increase in the capacity of teachers and school leaders to engage with digital technologies as part of their daily practice.

It is essential that schools be adequately supported to build on this enhanced level of digital capability, and to continue to expand their use of digital technologies as a valuable support for pupils and students in their learning.

Vulnerable pupils and students were most affected

Covid-19 presented particular challenges for certain cohorts of pupils and students. While it will take time to establish the full impact on our school communities, early reviews of the first wave of lockdowns and school closures suggested significant learning loss, particularly for children and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs (Darmody et al., 2020). More recent international analyses, documented since the beginning of school closures in March 2020 and March 2022, provide even more evidence of learning loss (Patrinós et al., 2022).

These national and international findings are supported by the Inspectorate's own research, which showed that while schools were closed, there were significant challenges in engaging pupils and students who were most at risk of educational disadvantage (Inspectorate, 2020, 2021h). Subsequent research showed that while certain cohorts continued to experience more significant learning losses than others, the impact of this was alleviated by the range of interventions and supports facilitated by the Department and implemented by schools (Inspectorate, 2022b).

“ Early reviews of the first wave of lockdowns and school closures suggested significant learning loss.

Impact of the pandemic on participation in school life

Since 2015, the Inspectorate has been committed to developing its practice regarding how it takes account of the perspectives and insights of children and young people, and how it engages and works with them. The learning from this period informed the Inspectorate's work with focus groups of pupils and students throughout autumn 2020, when schools reopened following the first lockdown.

Findings from this work echoed those arising from international research which showed that the pandemic reduced the opportunities for many children and young people to have their voice heard and to acquire the necessary skills and competencies to assert their rights (Hoskins and Donbavand, 2021).

The overall purpose of the Inspectorate's focus groups with pupils and students was to listen to, learn about, and understand their experiences

following their return to school in September 2020. A key message was that being in school, irrespective of Covid-related restrictions, was very important for their wellbeing, socialisation, and learning. Pupils and students articulated a new-found appreciation for the work of their school and teachers.

This research also identified several areas for schools to consider generally and to develop further. It highlighted the importance for pupils and students of getting feedback on their work, and the value they placed on collaborative and practical activity. It emphasised the need for them to be involved in decisions affecting them. At post-primary level, students in Senior Cycle asked for greater autonomy to manage their work (Inspectorate, 2021c).

Targeted supports to mitigate the impact of Covid-related learning loss

September 2021 saw the launch of the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme (CLASS) for measures to mitigate learning loss and provide targeted additional teaching support for pupils and students following the period of Covid-related closures and restrictions. This scheme enabled schools to identify pupils and students most at risk of learning loss, and to put in place specific targeted teaching supports to meet their needs.

“ A key message was that being in school, irrespective of Covid-related restrictions, was very important for pupils' wellbeing, socialisation, and learning.

Enhanced allocations were provided for special schools and schools in the Department's Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme. The CLASS programme also provided for shared learning opportunities between schools to ensure that good practice in meeting pupils' and students' needs and mitigating learning loss was shared and replicated. This scheme complemented a range of additional targeted supports for pupils and students most impacted, including a supplementary programme at Easter and a greatly enhanced summer programme.

Looking forward

The Inspectorate has continued to research the impact on pupils and students and their achievement across a range of areas arising from their disrupted experiences of learning over two school years. A composite report on the findings of a series of incidental inspections and curriculum evaluations in the 2021/2022 school year is currently in development.

Preliminary findings for both sectors indicate the need to develop and embed whole-school assessment practices and for schools to continue to develop their approaches to home-school communication. Findings at primary level suggest a need for schools to place additional emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills. The findings from this report and from other Inspectorate research will support the development of educational policy and resourcing in this area over the medium to longer term.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on the learning of children and young people in Irish schools. It has also impacted on the practices of teachers and has presented both challenges and opportunities. In general, primary and post-primary schools reported that the vast majority of pupils and students had successfully adjusted to in-school teaching and learning post-pandemic, and that challenges relating to their learning and wellbeing were being addressed. However, losses in social, emotional, and cognitive domains were significant and disproportionately impactful for learners with the highest level of need.

Evaluations conducted post-Covid and during the Inspectorate's previous interactions with schools during periods of school closure confirmed that there exists a clear link between high-calibre leadership and positive learning outcomes. Where in-school leadership was effective, inspectors referenced the high quality of whole-school approaches to teaching and learning, both during in-person interactions and in the online environment.

Evaluations confirmed that there exists a clear link between high-calibre leadership and positive learning outcomes.

It will be important for schools and for the wider education community to learn from the experience of Covid-19, to build on the successes while addressing the challenges that remain. In particular, pupils and students who have been disproportionately impacted by school closures should be monitored closely and should be supported in whatever ways are necessary from the perspective of both wellbeing and learning.

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Preliminary findings from Inspectorate research indicates the need to develop and embed whole-school assessment practices and for schools to continue to develop their approaches to home-school communication. Findings also suggest a need for schools to place additional emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills.



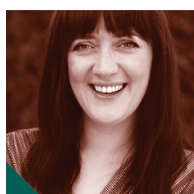
The Impact of School Leadership on Teachers' Wellbeing



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This article discusses the lack of research on teacher wellbeing. It demonstrates how certain factors predict teachers' personal wellbeing, with the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) scale applied to measure wellbeing in a recent study. The results indicated that only two factors predicted teacher wellbeing: putting support strategies in place, and school leaders caring about teachers.

Introduction



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While there are considerable policies and research that promote the wellbeing of students, it seems reasonable to assume that teacher wellbeing should also be addressed (Roffey, 2012). Yet research on teacher wellbeing remains scarce (Parker et al., 2012). Today, the crisis imputable to the Covid-19 pandemic has made teacher wellbeing more urgent than ever. Teachers in nearly 200 countries worldwide were affected by the pandemic (UN, 2020). They became frontline education providers in the midst of chaos, which resulted in many of them experiencing emotional exhaustion and lower job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2021).

Teaching young people through collective trauma took a toll on educators' wellbeing (Crosby et al., 2020), and the consequences may continue for years. In Ireland, an assessment of teacher wellbeing showed that they experienced more stress and lower levels of wellbeing nine months into the pandemic compared with a year before (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). While more research is required to confirm this, teachers' wellbeing may be at its lowest during this period.

Defining wellbeing in a school setting

Evident in the literature is the lack of consensus on what wellbeing is and how it should be defined (Burke, 2021). Definitions of it are blurred and too broad to understand (Forgeard et al., 2011). Though wellbeing is not a new concept, it has become more important in recent times in the educational context, evident in its inclusion on agendas of international organisations such as the WHO (2020), UN (2020), and UNICEF (Reuge et al., 2021). Nonetheless, teachers and managements continue to struggle to grasp its meaning (Doran, 2021), which makes the implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework more difficult (Camfield et al., 2009).

A recent study by Doran, Burke, and Healy (forthcoming) examined how well teachers' personal wellbeing can be predicted from factors

such as having a wellbeing policy, completing wellbeing CPD (continuing professional development), management caring about staff, having wellbeing on staff meeting agendas, and having support strategies in place, after controlling for age. Most of the 293 participating teachers were female (69.5%), from a range of second-level schools in both rural and urban areas across all four provinces in Ireland. Wellbeing was measured using the Mental Health Continuum Short Form scale (MHC-SF).

Discussion

The results of the study indicated that only two factors predicted teacher wellbeing in the model: management having support strategies in place for teachers, and teachers knowing that their management cared about them. Both factors related to leadership effectiveness in creating an environment that helped employees to flourish.

This is consistent with previous, robust research that linked leadership behaviour with employees' wellbeing, emphasising the fundamental role that leaders play in ensuring that their team is well (e.g., Cherkowski, 2018; van der Vyver et al., 2020; Zhong et al., 2020; Briker et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it is the first study that identified leadership factors being more impactful on teachers' personal wellbeing than having a wellbeing policy, doing regular wellbeing CPDs, and keeping wellbeing on the meeting agenda, which is usually the advice given to educators who wish to enhance their wellbeing (Falecki & Mann, 2020; Lester et al., 2020).

Establishing a wellbeing policy is often one of the first recommendations given to schools to ensure that their community's wellbeing is prioritised and

“ Involving teachers in policy creation, and the change associated with it, will yield better results than setting up the policy for them and expecting them to adhere to it.

improved (Hoffman et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Frijters & Krekel, 2021). This means that schools' management and teachers must be familiar with a wide range of guidelines developed by others, and capable of enacting these new guidelines while being accountable to other educational managerial groups. Our study, however, showed that this did not predict teacher wellbeing. This finding is consistent with other studies showing that some policies do not change behaviours (e.g. Lucarelli et al., 2015).

This may be due to how wellbeing policy was implemented and enacted, and whether it was imposed on teachers or introduced collaboratively. But the implementation of educational policies does not always lead to achieving the policymaker's intended outcomes, and sometimes these outcomes do not match the needs of the school (Hess, 2013). Individual policy and policymakers rarely consider the complex environments of policy enactment or the need for schools to respond to several policy demands and expectations concurrently (Ball, 1997). Involving teachers in policy creation and change associated with it yields better results than setting it up for them and expecting them to adhere to it (Beryl et al., 2009). Collaboration is therefore very important when developing a wellbeing policy for schools, as teacher wellbeing is a shared responsibility which creates an opportunity

for schools and sectors to work in partnership with managerial agencies and professional associations (McCallum & Price, 2012).

The study implied that two important factors need to be considered when designing a wellbeing strategy for a school: putting support strategies in place, and management showing they care for their team. These findings can therefore (i) inform policymakers of the components that need to be incorporated in developing an effective wellbeing policy and interventions; (ii) inform stakeholders and school leaders that if you put support strategies in place and show staff that you care, you could enhance teacher wellbeing; and (iii) encourage leadership educational programmes to ensure that school leaders are aware of the impact of their behaviour on teachers' wellbeing. Further research is needed to evaluate these potential support strategies for management and to measure their effectiveness.

Developing the wellbeing of teachers can make a substantial difference to the whole school community. When teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy to their students. They are also more likely to share and work with others to support their students and promote wellbeing (Roffey, 2012). This can only be a positive thing for all involved.

“When teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more likely to show patience and empathy to their students.”

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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. The next conference will be held in the **TUS Limerick on 31st March & 1st April 2023**. The theme: **Science Education for a Sustainable Future**.



For up-to-date information visit:

Website: www.ista.ie

Twitter: @IrishSciTeach

Facebook: www.facebook.com/IrishScienceTeachersAssociation



Connect Safely with the Digital World

Anna Finnegan and Ash Kennedy with members of the youth advocacy programme: Dr Aphra Kerr of Maynooth University and Stephen Byrne, formerly of RTE's 2FM.

The Connect Safely Programme was launched in Dublin City Centre in December 2022, in the CHQ Building. The aim of the programme is to engage young people in safe, creative, digital learning experiences where they can learn, connect, be informed and be creative.

Foróige was the leader in developing the programme, with input from experts and organisations working in the field of protecting young people online, in addition to involvement from the wider youth sector and a panel of young people.

The Connect Safely Programme targets young people aged 12-18 years. Its aims are:

- To promote safer use of digital resources thus equipping young people with the skills to safely benefit from being online;
- To empower young people to participate safely in their online communities as positive digital citizens.

The Programme offers a unique opportunity for youth workers and young people to come together and explore digital safety from a holistic perspective. It covers a wide range of topics, including:

- Cyberbullying
- Digital Footprint
- Benefits and Risks of the Internet
- Privacy Settings
- Managing Screen Time and Well-Being
- Digital Citizenship
- Digital Leadership
- Digital Resilience
- Gaming/Gambling
- FOMO (fear of missing out)
- Online Relationships
- Sexting

The Connect Safely Programme includes a comprehensive Facilitator Training Curriculum for youth work staff and volunteers to ensure they are best equipped to facilitate the programme with young people. This training curriculum contains post-training supports such as the Connect Safely Programme Facilitator Site and a free-to-use page that hosts all programmatic resources. The training curriculum is updated regularly based on feedback from participants.



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4 Further Education & Training



A YEAR OF PROGRESS AND FORWARD THINKING IN FET AND APPRENTICESHIP

Establishment of the National Apprenticeship Office

Funding for FET

Reform and ambition – Strategic Performance Agreements and System Targets

Progressing the FET Strategy

Capital Investment





2022: A Year of Progress and Forward Thinking in FET and Apprenticeship



This article offers an overview of further education and training (FET) in Ireland in what proved to be a year of progress and exciting developments for the sector. It describes the key achievements in FET and apprenticeship in 2022 and looks ahead to a busy 2023.



Andrew Brownlee
CEO, SOLAS

Introduction: taking stock and looking forward

2022 was a year of much progress right across the further education and training (FET) system, with SOLAS and the education and training boards (ETBs) looking ahead together to a positive future. 2020 and 2021 were years of many milestones despite the challenges and disruption faced globally; 2022 has continued on this path, being a year of considerable shared effort and tangible investment into the future of FET.

The north star for the past three years has been Future FET: Transforming Learning, the FET strategy launched in July 2020, and the three strategic priorities it set out: to build skills, create pathways, and foster inclusion. Despite the immense changes and challenges brought to our society and economy due to Covid-19, full delivery of this strategy is well on track. Underpinning all of the work to progress it is a focus on the needs and experiences of FET learners, and on ensuring that their unique potential is realised.

With all of this as the backdrop, it has certainly been a period of significant change in FET. As I see it, 2022 has been a year of implementing vital building blocks that together will make up the future of FET in Ireland, with strides made in important and transformative areas such as long-awaited funding-model reform and national system targets. Major steps have also been taken in the world of apprenticeship, setting the scene for further development in 2023 and beyond.

Establishing the National Apprenticeship Office

In April 2021, Minister Simon Harris launched the five-year Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025. It sets out a roadmap for a single apprenticeship system and a five-year strategy to deliver on the Programme for Government commitment of reaching 10,000 new apprentice registrations a year by 2025. A key objective of the plan is

to ensure that the apprenticeship system will increase its contribution to meeting Ireland's skills requirements.

As part of the Action Plan, in January 2022 the National Apprenticeship Office was set up, a new body jointly managed between SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority. The new National Apprenticeship Office continues to drive reform in the system under the banner of Generation Apprenticeship, spearheading a range of new initiatives to support both employers and apprentices.

There are now around 25,000 apprentices training in Ireland, across 66 diverse programmes, with around 9,000 employers on board. Apprentice registrations were over 8,607 in 2021, which is the highest since 2007 and an increase of nearly 40% compared to 2019. At the time of writing we were on track to match these levels in 2022 as well.

In April 2022, a new gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers was announced. The bursary, which is worth €2,666, is available to employers who employ apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with more than 80% representation of a single gender. In July 2022, the roll-out of €17.2 million in capital funding to respond to the growing demand for apprenticeships was announced.

In April 2022, a new gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers was announced.

This October, the National Apprenticeship Office celebrated the first ever Apprentice of the Year Awards, which showcased the talent, drive, and commitment of the apprentices at the heart of this dynamic, exciting system. 2023 is set to be a similar year of growth for the office, as more targets set out in the Action Plan will no doubt be achieved.

Watershed moment for FET funding

In July 2022, plans for a significant shift in the funding model for the FET sector were announced. This announcement was the product of extensive consultation by an independent expert panel over the last number of years, with close engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, SOLAS, the ETBs, and other key stakeholders including industry, staff, and learner representatives.

This report, and the plans based on it, simplified the legacy approach to the funding of ETBs, streamlining it into a 'five pot' structure that will allow for greater autonomy and flexibility. This simpler model puts a focus on providing core funding, which will allow each ETB to be an effective and strategic deliverer of FET and to meet the needs of their regions, recognising the individual characteristics and challenges faced around the country.

More specifically, this new funding approach will allow for investment in critical capabilities that will enable transformation in areas such as learner support, digitalisation, quality assurance, agile course development, and capital infrastructure. It will drive innovation and growth in FET provision

and facilitate the harmonisation of FET programmes. It will ensure fairness and transparency in how FET is funded, and link more clearly to the learner outcomes generated by ETBs.

Reform and ambition: strategic performance agreements and system targets

Ten FET College of the Future projects have been approved for further development, in Bray, Cavan, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Castlebar, Newcastlewest, Killarney, Clonmel, and Fingal.

2022 has also seen the rolling out of new strategic performance agreements with each of the 16 ETBs, which act as the second realisation of the Transforming Learning strategy at regional level. These will run in 2022–2024, and each one is unique to the ETB, clearly setting out its strengths, characteristics, and agreed commitments to a range of national FET system targets.

These national system targets have been agreed at Department level, building on those set in the original strategic performance agreements in 2018–2020, with additional focus on policy and skills imperatives. The new agreements embed clear annual ETB contributions to the national targets, which cover areas such as employment outcomes, pathways within FET, progression to higher education, nearly-zero-energy building (Nzeb) and retrofitting, green skills, and adult literacy.

Future-focused capital development

Key to the delivery of these national targets, and to wider transformation of the FET system, will be new strategic investment in capital infrastructure projects. Major capital funding calls have been launched to help deliver on the FET College of the Future vision set out in the Transforming Learning strategy, with investment committed towards this shared national project and future for FET provision.

This is an important movement away from what has historically been a siloed provision of FET programmes, towards a system based on course offering, National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level, or learner outcome, be that progression to higher education or to the workforce. Ten FET College of the Future projects have been approved for further development, in Bray, Cavan, Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Castlebar, Newcastlewest, Killarney, Clonmel, and Fingal.

We have also seen the exciting further development of the National Construction Training Centre and a Modern Methods of Construction Demonstration Park in Mount Lucas under the Housing for All plan. The Advanced Manufacturing Training Centre in Dundalk has also received new investment. The specialisation of ETBs in meeting critical needs of industry like in these two examples is another key goal of the Future FET vision. Add to that the exciting development of a Dublin city centre FET campus at

Cathal Brugha Street, and new integrated college developments in Wexford and Ennis, and we are truly seeing a new FET landscape emerge.

To a bright future for FET

FET holds importance not just as an education and training choice, but also as a key component of Irish society. FET holds a unique position due the pathway options it offers into and within our communities, and the role it plays in unlocking potential across many different aspects of our society – from the apprentice to the adult literacy student, from the school leaver to the lifelong learner, and everyone in between.

Those working in the FET sector keenly understand this unique value, and that is what keeps us working together for change and development. 2022 has been a year of progress, and I'm certain that 2023 will be a year in which that progress is built upon. The future is bright.

FET holds a unique position due the pathway options it offers into and within our communities, and the role it plays in unlocking potential across many different aspects of our society – from the apprentice to the adult literacy student, from the school leaver to the lifelong learner, and everyone in between.

Towards a New Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills, and Knowledge

This article by Minister Harris outlines the seismic changes of recent years in how education and learning are delivered after the school system in Ireland. These changes have been aimed at creating a new unified tertiary system with learners at its centre. The article stresses the importance of inclusive access to this system and describes the measures that will help realise it.



Simon Harris TD
Minister for Further
and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation
and Science

Introduction

When the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science first came into being in 2020, this country and much of the world was grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic. The actions of educators, learners, and staff during those first few months told me everything I needed to know about the third level or tertiary sector.

Amidst the public health restrictions and economic decision-making, it was clear to me instantly that the further and higher education sectors and the research community were determined to keep education open and research continuing in whatever form it took to remain safe. Education is vital, a powerful source for good, and those working in third level showed true leadership, adaptation, and kindness for learners during that period. This is a sector which didn't lose out on a single day of learning and teaching during the pandemic.

As the first Minister of the Department, I have relished the opportunity to bring about seismic and enduring change in how we deliver education and learning after the school system. What it means for our lives, whether we are 18 or 58, is a conversation that has often been lost in narrow debates on university rankings and points. The ability to shape our futures through knowledge, skills, and training has changed countless lives, created one of the most highly educated populations in the world, and driven social and economic change beyond the dreams of the founders of the State.

Unfortunately, not everyone has had the opportunity to make that journey, and so my Department has set out a programme for reform of the third-level and tertiary system to deliver more pathways, greater access to research, education, and training, and more alignment to economic needs.

Unified tertiary system

We are building a new unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge. The key goal of this work is to simplify navigation of the tertiary education system by creating more clarity around entry requirements and transition opportunities. The aim is to provide accessible information and guidance on how to access and navigate the system for current and future learners.

This new system we are building together will have learners at the centre. By this I mean that irrespective of where learners enter further education and training, higher education, or a research career, they are in a single system which responds to individual talents, ambitions, and motivations. As people live actively for longer, the system will provide opportunities for re-skilling, upskilling, and repurposing qualifications best suited to the learner's stage of development, interest, and life circumstances.

We are building a new unified tertiary system for learning, skills, and knowledge.

The work has already begun to make this policy platform a reality. Our capital calls have collaboration and pathways embedded. Just recently (December 2022), we have launched 13 new collaborative programmes between further and higher education, with more to come. The strength of this work and its importance can be seen in the appetite of the sector to embark upon this journey.

Higher education

The question of sustainable funding for higher education was an obvious start for us in the new Department with the Cassells report gathering dust for many years previously. *Funding the Future*, which I launched in May 2021, is the Department's landmark policy document that settles the question on both the funding model and the funding gap once and for all.

With it, we have put in place a twin-track approach: first, a plan on how to fund higher education with a reform process (with an agreed funding gap of €307m); secondly, a plan to address the cost of education for students in Ireland. As a government we ruled out the possibility of introducing student loans and decided that the higher education system will not be funded by one pot only into the future. Rather, it will be a multi-funded model of additional Exchequer investment and employer contributions through the National Training Fund.

The student contribution fee will be retained, but I am committed to reducing it over time. We made really good progress in Budget 2022, with a €1,000 refund on the student contribution as a cost-of-living measure. Furthermore, a new income bracket will be introduced in the Student Support Scheme from September 2023, which will see a €500 reduction in the student contribution where income is under €100,000.

Our plan for the future revolves around effective system performance and universal access to education. In prioritising core funding increases, the intention is that quality of outcomes will improve, the agility and responsiveness of higher education will be strengthened, and the reputation of Ireland's higher education system will be enhanced. We will move back towards European and OECD norms in terms of staffing ratios.

By focusing on access to education, we will bring our third-level education system into line with the State's universal-access approach of primary and secondary education. For the first time ever, we published a *Cost of Education* paper in advance of the Budget, and this process will continue over the years ahead. Hand in glove with the increase in funding, there will be a reform process overseen by an implementation group, which I am honoured to co-chair with Professors Anne Looney and Tom Collins.

This is an exciting time for higher education in Ireland. We plan on providing more funding for universities, new technological universities in the regions, an ongoing reduction in student costs, and an increase in student supports.

Further education and apprenticeship

Our primary objective has been to create a system where every journey is valued and equal. One of my proudest initiatives as Minister in this Department has been to bring apprenticeships and further education onto the CAO website – to show students all of their options. We want to go further again, and alongside Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) – the third-level regulator – we want to develop a singular website with information for everyone aged 16 to 65.

One of my proudest initiatives as Minister in this Department has been to bring apprenticeships and further education onto the CAO website – to show students all of their options.

Further education and training is one of our greatest national strategic assets, yet for too long it has lived in the shadows of other educational programmes. We are beginning to put our money where our mouth is and rolling out huge capital investment to this area. And the results are positive. Last year, the highest number of apprentices were registered, meaning we are well on our way to meet our targets.

We have also reached out to more marginalised groups to consider apprenticeship as an option. We have invested in access to apprenticeship courses in two of our technological universities, and we have established new funding streams for members of the Travelling Community.

Equality and inclusion

Education is the greatest of levellers, and therefore inclusion of all groups in Irish society in the third-level system is a key priority for me and my Department. We have embedded a social inclusion and equality approach

across all project and programme delivery, from apprenticeships to further education and training, research, and high education.

Examples include the publication this year of the fourth strategic National Access Plan, with new, more ambitious targets around entry to high education for underrepresented groups. For the first time, we take specific steps to ensure that young people with experience of care are supported to enter and complete higher education. We have also launched a new funding stream, Path 4, which will see dedicated funding for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education institutions.

The 10-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy will change the lives of adult learners who have unmet literacy, numeracy, or digital literacy needs. No one should feel stigmatised because they can't write, or read the medicine bottle. An ALL strategy programme office has been established to drive the strategy forward, with regional literacy co-appointed across the country.

The 10-year Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy will change the lives of adult learners who have unmet literacy, numeracy, or digital literacy needs.

Under our apprenticeship action plan, we have delivered several social inclusion initiatives to progress underrepresented groups, such as the Traveller and Roma Apprenticeship Incentivisation Programme, Social Inclusion Apprentice Bursary, Access to Apprenticeship programmes, and Access and Inclusion subcommittee of the National Apprenticeship Alliance (NAA).

Conclusion

Finally, we have sought to embed an approach within the Department to ensure that younger generations have their voices heard and their lived experience expressed in policy outcomes. This is a landmark period for students, their families, and the future of third-level education in Ireland.

Third-level education and training serves Ireland and its people exceptionally well. We now rank third in the OECD and second in the EU for third-level qualification. The more people we can educate to third level, the better the individual outcomes for them and their families, including income.

The world around us is changing, and so are the needs of learners and employers. Our education and training system needs to respond by addressing some of the barriers to learners of all ages that prevent them from accessing the programmes they need to live fulfilled lives and build strong careers. The country will be all the better for it.

Strategic Development of the Tertiary Education System

This article provides an update on the work of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in supporting the strategic development of the tertiary education and training sector. It highlights the significant progress on the areas that were focused on in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021*.

I am delighted to have been given the opportunity, one year on from my article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2021* by Education Matters, and well into the second full year since the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, to provide an update on the work of the Department in supporting the strategic development of the tertiary education and training sector. I am pleased to be able to say that we have made significant progress on the areas of focus that I highlighted in 2021's *Yearbook*.

This is a crucial time for our entire sector to contribute to the major societal and economic issues that Ireland faces: not least continuing expansion in enrolments, driven by favourable demographics but also by the acceleration of change associated with decarbonisation and digitisation transitions set out in national policy, including in the *Climate Action Plan*, *Project Ireland 2040*, the *National Digital Strategy – Harnessing Digital*, and the *White Paper on Enterprise 2022–2030*.

Whereas the Department's establishment is novel in Irish terms, our portfolio is by no means unusual in Europe or globally. Countries such as France, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Poland all have Ministries with major elements similar to ours. In Irish terms the portfolio is sizeable, representing the fourth-largest revenue budget across government.

In response to being accorded this mandate by government, the Department's first Statement of Strategy, which covers the period 2021–2023, laid out an ambitious agenda. It is one that colleagues in the Department have taken hold of and delivered on enthusiastically. As a result we can see many of the big-ticket items from that Strategy being delivered.

It has been a privilege to be part of a Department that has made a positive impact in such a short period of time. The support and engagement that my colleagues and I have received from the national agencies and the further and higher education and research sectors, and the desire of all to work together in a collaborative and progressive way, have been instrumental in this progress.



Jim Breslin
Secretary General of the
Department of Further
and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation
and Science

Central to the Department's policy remit has been acknowledgement that learners' pathway to success is not uniform and, indeed, often not linear. That recognition is driving the landmark work under way to develop a unified tertiary sector – our vision of a system for learning, skills, and knowledge, composed of complementary further and higher education, research, and innovation pathways. 'Unified' should never be mistaken for 'uniform'; the latter has never been seen by the Department as a desirable goal for the wider tertiary sector. Indeed, in engagement with stakeholders, I have been explicit that the system should be unified, *not* uniform. This is not wordplay. Distinct and complementary elements contribute to a coherent whole. Providing opportunities for every learner, and at every point in their life, requires diversity rather than uniformity.

Importantly, for diversity to flourish, difference needs to be valued and respected. Further education and training has its own philosophy, traditions, and track record, together with a clear and differentiated strategic direction in *Future FET: Transforming Learning – The National FET Strategy*. Highlighting the development of technological universities in last year's article, I wrote that they 'will have a distinct role and purpose in the overall higher education sector' and that this distinct role has been set out in both the Technological Universities Act, 2018, and the TURN Report: *Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration through Connectivity*.

With regard to the traditional university sector, it is imperative to support each of those institutions in articulating and making their vital contributions, both individually and collectively. The government's commitment to increasing core funding to the higher education sector provides a positive environment in which these universities can respond and identify future priorities that build on their many achievements to date. The capability that exists in these institutions is recognised as a key national asset across various policies, including *Funding the Future* and *Impact 2030 – Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*.

The overall policy framework for the sector will be further strengthened by Section 33 of the Higher Education Authority Act, 2022. This section requires the Minister to prepare a strategy at intervals of not more than every 10 years for the provision of tertiary education – that is both further and higher education. Explicitly, in doing so, the legislation acknowledges different elements and requires the strategy to address how such elements relate to each other. This will provide further opportunity to dispel any fears of a drift towards homogeneity, which would be contrary to policy and to what the country requires. Instead the tertiary strategy will identify how a diverse but interconnected system can deliver for learners, regions, and our country as a whole.

While developing this tertiary strategy and working on some other areas of policy priority in the period ahead, the overall focus of the Department will continue to shift towards policy implementation. With a number of key

“ Unified should never be mistaken for uniform; the latter has never been seen by the Department as a desirable goal for the wider tertiary sector. ”

national policies now in place, the focus will be on their implementation, as highlighted below.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion, and access to education

In looking forward to our work in the next 12 months, we intend to consistently prioritise inclusion and impact. How do we keep students and learners at the centre of our work? We are focused, now more than ever, on ensuring that the tertiary sector is one that fosters inclusion and provides a springboard for success for an increasingly diverse student population. While we continue to work to make the path to tertiary education as open as possible, we must also ensure that everyone feels welcome, accepted, and supported in our institutions. That is why the new *National Access Plan* seeks not just equity of access but of participation and success.

If not addressed by policy, the cost of college and rising inflation will build barriers to entry and participation for students and learners. Government is putting resources in place to help deal with these issues. This year, for the first time, the Department published an annual options paper on reducing the cost of higher education ahead of Budget 2023. The paper directly contributed to Budgetary decisions, including the 14% increase in the special and higher rates of SUSI maintenance grants, introduced with effect from 1 January 2023.

“ The new National Access Plan seeks not just equity of access but of participation and success. ”

Secure and affordable accommodation is important in ensuring that students can focus on their studies. Wider pressures in the rental market and the increased costs of constructing purpose-built student accommodation are posing major difficulties. The government has approved proposals for the State to assist higher education institutions (HEIs) with the cost of building student accommodation to ensure increased availability and promote greater access, particularly for priority student groups. As an initial priority, the Department and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) are currently engaged directly with institutions to activate those building projects that have already secured full planning permission.

Higher education

There have been a number of critical developments in the higher education sector over this past year that will provide a platform for further strengthening the sector.

With the commencement of the Higher Education Authority Act, 2022, on 10 November 2022 we will see a significant strengthening of governance structures. These will provide a robust framework in which agile HEIs can deliver on their missions. The Act is clear that the task of good governance extends not just to conformance but to performance, that is, to both regulatory compliance and institutional success. Indeed, the first listed

requirement of a governing authority of a HEI is to promote the success (including academic success) and reputation of the university.

Funding the Future, published in May, provides a sustainable path forward in funding, modernisation and reform. Importantly, the question of how higher education will be funded has been settled. The government has determined that student loans will not form part of the funding landscape. This has been welcomed across the political spectrum.

The *Funding the Future* collaborative implementation process has been established and is addressing the strategic outcomes identified by government for the sector, including enhancing the quality and international standing of higher education across its missions of teaching and learning, research, and engagement; driving skills development, including for important public services; enhancing student participation and success, with particular focus on under-represented groups; supporting a balanced and integrated unified knowledge and skills system; and addressing cost as a barrier to education. Linking increased funding with enhanced quality and verification of outcomes was a key tenet of the Cassells report.

In Budget 2023, in the context of the acute and competing budgetary pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis, it was no mean achievement to start providing additional core funding. Substantial additional funds were also made available for demographic pressures, pensions, and national pay awards. There is much work to do to deliver both remaining core funding and verified outcomes, for existing and additional funds, in the period ahead.

The new academic year began with the targeted addition by the HEA and institutions of over 1,000 undergraduate places in courses where graduates are in great demand. This includes 60 additional undergraduate medicine places as part of an agreed expansion of 200 over the period ahead. This is the largest expansion in recent decades and reflects the requirement to grow our health service in response to population ageing. This requirement is also reflected in the recent expressions-of-interest process conducted by the HEA for institutions to come forward with expansion plans in health-related areas.

The establishment of technological universities (TUs) has continued to advance. Following the establishment of Atlantic Technological University in April 2022, the South East Technological University – the fifth TU in Ireland – was established in May. Strengthening the capabilities of the five TUs to achieve their unique missions over the coming years will remain a key focus for the Department. The recently published OECD *Review of Technological University Academic Career Paths, Contracts and Organisation in Ireland* provides us with a robust evidence base from which to do so.

Research and innovation

Ireland's innovation landscape is enriched by a very high-performing research sector. Implementation of *Impact 2030*, which was approved

by government in May 2022, will maximise the impact of research and innovation with a focus on national priorities, both economic and social.

We want Ireland to be a leader in talent. In order to do that we must ensure that our best and brightest can pursue their research ambitions. One of the actions identified through *Impact 2030* was a national review of State supports for PhD students. This has now been initiated and is considering the current supports and how we match up internationally when it comes to PhD students.

Impact 2030 also entails major change in the Irish research landscape, with the establishment in January 2024 of a new research agency through the amalgamation of the functions and activities of the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. This move is intended to facilitate greater interdisciplinary research and will place the new body at the centre of the country's response to challenges such as climate action, digital transformation, and wellbeing.

Further education and training

The development of the further education and training (FET) sector is essential in addressing the needs of learners and meeting the country's evolving skills requirements. The modernisation of the sector through the *Future FET* strategy has received added impetus with the announcement of successful candidates for a number of FET Colleges of the Future under the programme of strategic capital investment in the FET sector which is provided for in *Project 2040*. The welcome inclusion of FET options on the CAO website assists those planning post-secondary education to be fully informed on the range of options available. Of course FET also offers support for lifelong learning to those who are seeking career opportunities or are already in employment.

“The inclusion of FET options on the CAO website assists those planning post-secondary education to be fully informed on the range of options available.”

Apprenticeship programmes are examples that traverse the further and higher education sectors, with learners moving between FET centres and technological universities at different stages. The 'earn-and-learn' model also provides strong linkage between employment and college. It is 'college and career' rather than 'college or career'. Work placements are a core feature of learning in many programmes across higher and further education. More generally, building on the enhanced profile of apprenticeship, we must continue to make the transition between learning and employment – and between different components of our overall tertiary education landscape – easier to navigate.

Climate

Heretofore, managing within budget has been a strong focus for all bodies in receipt of public funds. This will now be added to by the existential

requirement to reduce the carbon admissions associated with our activities. Pathfinder projects have been undertaken by a number of HEIs in retrofitting different building types, with the support of the Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. This programme will be expanded and extended to the FET sector. It will form part of the major effort required to meet the government's Climate Action Mandate. This Mandate requires each public body to develop their own climate action roadmap to reduce their carbon emissions by 51% and improve energy efficiency by 50% by 2030.

More broadly, the Department, the tertiary education sector, and the scientific and research communities are uniquely placed to contribute to Ireland's climate action. Decarbonising our economy requires new skills and the evidence base from our researchers to ensure we put in place the right strategies and technologies.

Securing a carbon-neutral Ireland will reshape the workforce in ways that will create new opportunities for workers, but also new risks. Transition towards climate-friendly growth will see jobs created in green sectors while they progressively fall away in sectors with high environmental footprints. The widespread availability and accessibility of quality education and training options, and the provision of up- and re-skilling opportunities at all career stages, will be essential in aiding the necessary transformation of the economy and associated career transitions.

SOLAS is currently developing a national suite of green-skills programmes in collaboration with enterprise partners for blended delivery by ETBs in areas such as sustainability awareness, resource efficiency, carbon reduction, and the circular economy. But in the future, sustainability will not just be the subject of specialist courses; it will become a core component of all education, with all of the implications that entails for how such education is provided across our sector.

Conclusion

2022 has been another critical year for the strategic development of the tertiary education sector, with significant developments across policy, funding, and governance. This has been amplified by the many achievements by institutions and the tertiary sector as a whole. It will be vital to keep up this momentum as we continue to respond to the changing needs of students and learners and the rapidly evolving demands at local, regional, and national level.

Ireland's success and sustainability are now, more than ever, reliant on the quality of our talent and the innovation generated in our sector. The reappointment of Minister Simon Harris and Minister of State Niall Collins provides us with a further period of leadership continuity to embed the progress already made and to continue to highlight what our sector can contribute.

ETBI's New Professional Learning & Development Hub

Providing centralised support for FET practitioners' professional development

This article announces the establishment of a new Professional Learning & Development Hub at Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). The hub aims to support the professional development of further education and training (FET) practitioners nationwide by providing centralised support to the ETB FET sector. The article describes the hub's work, benefits, and goals.

In September 2022 a Professional Learning & Development Hub was established at Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), funded by SOLAS. It is intended to provide centralised support to the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) further education and training (FET) sector and to lead the development of structures for the professional development of FET practitioners nationwide.

The effectiveness and quality of the further education and training sector depends ultimately on the excellence of its workforce. —Andrew Brownlee, CEO, SOLAS

More than 10,000 people currently work in further education and training in various roles (practitioner, leadership and management, administrative, ancillary), so the establishment of the Professional Learning & Development (PL&D) hub is paramount to ensuring that staff have the capability and confidence required for their role and respond more readily to meet the evolving needs of learners in a constantly changing environment.

A PL&D hub manager was recently appointed and will support delivery on national targets and goals identified for critical skills areas, such as leadership and management, technology-enhanced learning, quality assurance, vocational upskilling, and enterprise engagement.

The hub will work closely with SOLAS and the ETB networks, including the chief executive and directors of FET forums; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the professional learning and development coordinators; and the wider stakeholder groups across FET. It will support the implementation of the FET strategy, Future FET: Transforming Learning, by addressing the key enabling theme of staffing, capabilities, and structure. A formal PL&D steering group has also been established, with representatives from SOLAS, ETBI, directors of FET, and other key stakeholders.



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Learning & Development
Hub Manager, Education
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Centralising provision of professional learning and development opportunities across all 16 ETBs ensures the continued development of FET practitioners' expertise, while building a talent pipeline and embedding communities of practice in FET.

The FET Professional Learning and Development (PL&D) Strategy 2020–2024 shapes the evolution of professional learning and development to deliver on the future FET goals set out in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020–2024. The PL&D strategy's three goals guiding professional learning and development in the sector are:

Goal 1: Improve Infrastructure – Expanding access to learning resources and strengthening the delivery infrastructure for effective PL&D, including learning networks for sharing good practice nationally.

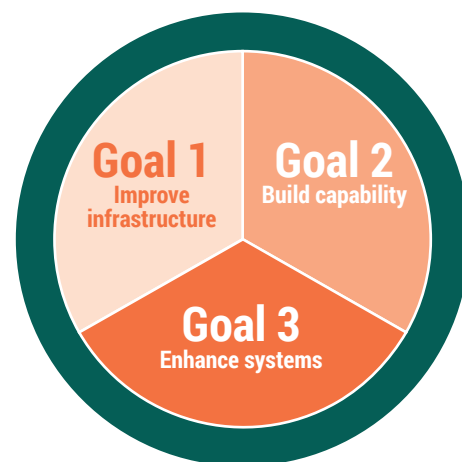
Goal 2: Build Capacity – Building the capability of those who work in the FET sector by identifying and deploying strategic PL&D initiatives in priority areas.

Goal 3: Enhance Systems – Developing sustainable systems to meet the planning, funding, resourcing, and evaluation requirements of PL&D in the FET sector.

One example of work undertaken by the hub since its establishment earlier in 2022 is the rollout of first-time initiatives in the area of active consent for the FET sector. As part of this cross-government-funded initiative, the hub, with the support of the PL&D coordinator network and the directors' forum, is providing workers across the sector with an opportunity to engage with multiple programmes developed by the Active* Consent team based at University of Galway. These programmes are pivotal in supporting education and training in consent, sexual violence, and harassment.

The first point-of-contact programme – the facilitator-led workshops and a series of self-directed modules – provide staff with specialist knowledge and information, skills, and support they need to deal appropriately with disclosure of sexual violence and increases their awareness of the causes and effects. FET staff can continue their professional learning beyond these programmes through a newly created digital resource, www.consenthub.ie, where they have access to podcasts, educational posters, and other development opportunities. ETBI will support the sector by running an online campaign on active consent awareness in November 2022.

Throughout 2023 the hub will continue to support skills development in critical areas through innovative and targeted PL&D opportunities offered through a national calendar, a series of themed events, and ongoing collaboration with providers who have expert knowledge in key areas.



PL&D strategic goals 2020–2024

The ETBI Professional Learning & Development hub will also support the sector with regard to FET guidance, information, and recruitment. Supports will include advising on high-quality and relevant initial guidance counselling education and training; providing PL&D opportunities for guidance practitioners across FET; and promoting the implementation of best practice in guidance counselling in centres for education and FET settings.

The PL&D hub will also promote the implementation of best practice in guidance counselling in non-formal settings in accordance with national priorities; advise on policy and strategies for promoting a continuum of guidance in lifelong learning; and provide advice, support, materials, and resources for guidance counselling in education and FET.

The hub will also lead and contribute to the exchange of information on guidance counselling provision and practice in FET with other guidance and employment services through Euroguidance, the National Resource Centre, both in Ireland and in other EU member states.

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The establishment of the Professional Learning & Development (PL&D) hub will ensure that staff have the capability and confidence required for their role.



A Digital Library for the Irish FET Sector

A user-focused service to support learning and teaching



David Hughes
Librarian

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is developing an online, user-focused library service that helps fulfil ETBI's support of learning and teaching in the ETB further education and training (FET) sector. It takes the form of a website that provides access to resources, guides, and tutorials and offers a number of benefits to the sector: efficiency, economies of scale, and a shared space.

Library provision across the Irish further education and training (FET) sector does not compare to the higher education sector. Because Education and Training Boards Ireland's (ETBI) remit includes providing supports to Education and Training Boards (ETBs), there is a compelling argument for ETBI to provide a library support to the ETBs. Such a service is good and useful for several reasons, including:

- It helps validate courses by helping assure qualification standards agencies that learners are being provided with supports and resources.
- It can be a useful marketing tool for an institution, enhancing its credibility and gravitas.
- Interaction with the library service helps with student retention (Murray et al., 2016) and success (Hughes, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2016).

ETBI is developing an online, user-focused library service that helps fulfil ETBI's support of learning and teaching in the ETB FET sector. The service takes the form of a website that provides access to resources, guides, and tutorials.

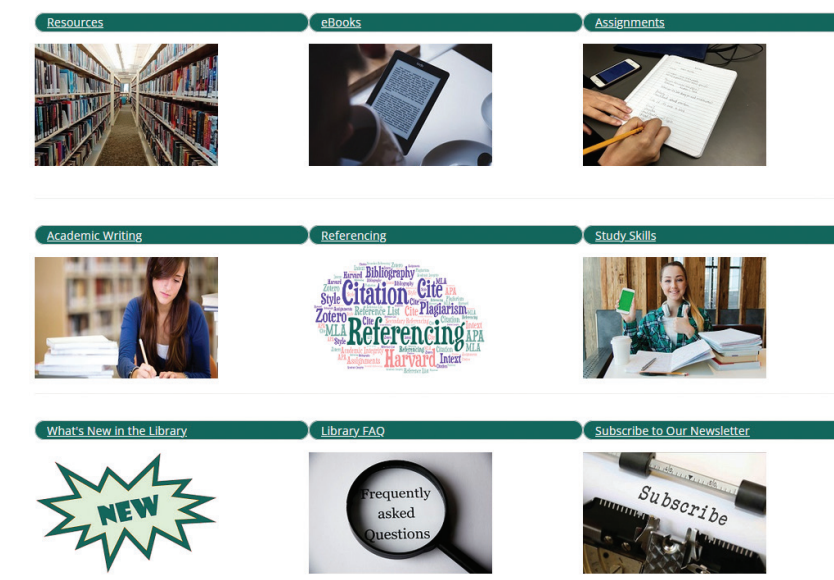
The library website

A library is more than a collection of resources. One cannot simply acquire resources, make them available, then say to users, 'Here, have at it.' Some instruction must be given in what the resources are, why they should be used instead of general internet sources, and how they are searched. After that, some guidance must be provided on citing and referencing sources, which also leads to discussion on how to avoid plagiarism.

When there is no physical library, it becomes necessary to have guides on searching, referencing, and so on online – through a website. Most libraries – certainly nearly all libraries of educational institutions – have a website, and it makes sense for ETBI's Digital Library to take this form. The Digital Library site is intended as a one-stop shop for hosting resources for the FET sector.

The Digital Library website is similar in structure and content to other academic library websites. Many FET learners will progress to higher education, and it will be useful for them to be aware of the requirements of academic writing and to have previous experience of academic library websites.

At the same time, it is well understood that FET learners come from a broader variety of backgrounds, so the Digital Library includes sections on core skills such as grammar, information sources and study skills, and links to resources, for example other useful websites in these areas.



Resources

It is fair to say that many resources aimed at academic libraries are geared towards higher education, but the ETBI library works with subject-matter experts to identify resources suitable for use in the FET sector.

Many practitioners fill the resource gap by developing their own teaching resources. The Digital Library would be a good way of disseminating these resources to a wider audience, and perhaps also of promoting cooperation between practitioners in different ETBs. There is a large and impressive corpus of work compiled in the ETBs, and the Digital Library can showcase



and promote it. Sixteen ETBs can potentially mean the wheel being invented 16 times over; the Digital Library can prevent that.

E-books

The Digital Library has access to two e-book platforms

- EBSCO eBooks for FE Subscription Collection; full-text access to over 7,000 e-books used in the UK FET sector
- ProQuest eBook Central, a catalogue of close to 2 million e-books that are available for purchase. The library is happy to accommodate purchase suggestions from subject-matter experts.

Open educational resources

There is much unhappiness with the cost of textbooks and other educational resources. This, and moves towards open knowledge, collaboration, and sharing, have led to the development of open educational resources (OERs). These are freely accessible, openly licensed text, media, and other assets that are useful for teaching and learning. In an Irish FET context, OERs would be good for supplementing subscription resources or replacing such resources that are primarily aimed at higher education libraries.

“ There is a large and impressive corpus of work compiled in the ETBs, and the Digital Library can showcase and promote it.

Benefits of the library

Sharing

The Digital Library has collaborated with the ETBI Supports for Apprentices Group on making a series of workbooks entitled *Maths for Trades* into OERs (ETBI Digital Library, 2022). These are publicly available through the library website and are open to modification, reuse, and redistribution through a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 Licence.

Creation of OERs like the *Maths for Trades* series will hopefully raise the profile of FET and encourage other practitioners to develop OERs for use in the FET sector and beyond. The workbook series provides a concrete example of how the Digital Library can be a catalyst for cross-ETB collaboration.

Efficiency

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has seen an influx of displaced Ukrainians into Ireland, many of whom have little or no English-language skills. The FET sector is at the forefront of providing them with courses on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

The Inclusion section of ETBI created several factsheets on FET in Ireland and had them translated into Ukrainian and Russian. These and other materials (Adult Education Officer contact details; ESOL worksheets) were added to a 'FET Resources for Ukrainians in Ireland' section of the Digital Library, whose URL was sent out to the ETBs for dissemination. Without the Digital Library, these materials would have to have been sent to each ETB to process individually. The Digital Library provides efficiencies by doing work that would otherwise have to be done by each ETB.

Economies of scale

In September 2021, new Early Learning and Care programmes at QQI levels 5 and 6 began in 14 ETBs. During the rollout, the Digital Library worked with the programme coordinators to provide access to video, e-book, and full-text resources to practitioners and learners. Without the Digital Library, each ETB or perhaps each college would have to look at buying resources for themselves.

The library therefore can be a FET equivalent of higher education's IReL (IReL, 2022), providing ETBs with access to licensed e-resources that otherwise would have to be bought individually.

Shared space

In addition to the public-facing pages which compose most of the Digital Library's content, there are several private sections (not indexed by search engines, and available only through the URL) that are used to share information and resources between staff at different ETBs. There is, for example, a private Supports for Apprentices group section where members share resources, and an Early Learning Care course coordinators' community of practice.

Growing the intellectual footprint

Repository

Most higher education institutions have repositories where work published by staff and students is stored and made publicly available. These repositories sometimes also include high-quality student work, which has two benefits for students:

- Having work available in this way is good for a student's CV.
- It shows new and current students not only how their work should look but also what level of work is required to get a good mark.

The FET sector had no equivalent, but the Digital Library has established EOLAS (ETBI, 2022), an online repository for capturing, storing, and

displaying the work of the sector. The repository was launched at the ETBI FET Conference in October 2022, and it is currently being populated.

Journal

The Irish FET sector is huge, and a lot of great work is done by FET practitioners. There is space to develop and manage an open-access peer-reviewed journal to publish work on and in the FET sector. Having a forum to publish and therefore disseminate work will raise the profile of both practitioners and the sector. A journal-publishing platform has been procured and, at the time of writing, an editorial board is being assembled before a call for papers is issued.

State of play

The ETBI Digital Library went live shortly after the Covid-19 lockdown began in March 2020, and it currently consists of around 400 publicly available pages across 60 sections, with links to over 1,200 websites and resources.

The Digital Library has full-text access to around 7,500 e-books and has acquired a small but growing number of subscription resources. The size and reach of the FET sector ensures that the Digital Library still has great potential for expansion. The library can be found at <https://library.etbi.ie/>.

ETBI FET Digital Library

Take your learning further



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Towards the Development of a Community Education Framework

The development of a Community Education Framework offers the opportunity to record, reflect, and recognise the diverse nature of community education that exists across Ireland. This article explores the opportunities presented by the development of such a framework in amplifying the voice of diverse learners and the contribution the sector makes across broader further education and training provision.

Introduction

SOLAS Future FET: Transforming Learning is the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy for 2020–2024 (SOLAS, 2020). Its ambitious agenda is aimed at transforming learning over these five years in order to deliver a more strategic and integrated FET system.

The strategy cites the need for a Community Education Framework to align the sector with common FET requirements, such as collecting basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support across the sector. The strategic position that community education holds requires consistency in supports to further grow and strengthen the bridge between the people hardest to reach in society and their engagement or re-engagement with a learning pathway into FET and beyond.

Community education

A core strength and enabler of inclusive education practice in FET in Ireland is the availability of a network of opportunities in every community. Central to this provision is community education and its position in communities. It can offer a local, accessible, and welcoming gateway to explore learning opportunities towards achieving personal, social, and educational fulfilment and goals.

Storytelling is intrinsic to the community education experience, and the relationships nurtured by supportive, empathetic tutors create a space for learners' stories that empowers them to reach their potential. This is especially true of learners who experience significant barriers, exacerbated through their previous experience of formal education; connection with other learners is the reward underlining the decision of many to engage.



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Research conducted in 2021 studied the role, contribution, and impact of Education and Training Board (ETB) FET provision and support services in community education in Ireland (ETBI, 2021). It illuminated a vibrant sector which not only contributed to the National FET Strategy but also ensured that community education could play a key part in supporting and advancing FET's evolving role in Ireland's social cohesion and development. Most importantly it empowered learners in their personal, social, and economic development. This is achieved through the diversity, inclusivity, and creativity that are commonplace in community education and that empower learners to 'develop personally, learn new things, shape our choices and create and inspire', as described in the FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020, p.16).

While all FET is characterised by learner-centred provision, community education can offer learners more flexibility through non-formal and informal approaches not provided for, or outside the requirements of, formal education settings. This is partly because while social exclusion and labour-market vulnerability are clearly linked, community education offers a gateway to raise awareness of progression pathways outside of activation policy and the employability agenda. And it is partly because community education is a developmental intervention designed, delivered, and funded with the community and voluntary sector as its key strategic partner.

Community education has strong links with community partners, which forms the bedrock of many initiatives. The trust and relationships established with these partners enable many marginalised and distanced learners to take the leap of faith required to engage in a programme and receive the necessary supports to address identified barriers. Common goals are shared between community education and community development, with community education key to achieving a range of beneficial societal outcomes, often in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.

The variety in learners engaged in community education, as documented in case studies in the ETBI (2021) study, is mirrored by the variety of motivations to engage. These include creating connections, developing skills, enquiring about themes of social justice and active citizenship, and learning in a relaxed, non-formal environment. There is an inherent link with adult literacy, with community education serving as an important gateway for learners to develop skills. This is recognised in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy, which is due to be rolled out soon.

Community education in the FET strategy

The critical role that community education plays in FET is outlined in the strategy, highlighting the sector's position in supporting participation and re-engagement in education and training, in particular for learners who are hardest to reach in society. The Community Education Framework will provide an opportunity to support consistency and mainstream the many innovative, community-based learning projects that exist.

At the same time it will support aligning the sector with common FET requirements, such as gathering basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support. This alignment will enhance the partnership between the ETBs and the community education sector and help the sector develop its wide-reaching connectivity across communities in Ireland.

Developing the Community Education Framework

Tasked with delivering on the FET strategy, SOLAS undertook the Community Education Framework project in early 2022. Its initial stages incorporated in-depth research. The 2021 report by ETBI provided extensive evidence on the sector, outlining the values underpinning community education and its distinguishing features (Figure 1), while also sharing the need for a consistent approach for all learner pathways in terms of FET resourcing, delivery, and supports.

Stakeholders in the community education sector were engaged with, to ensure that the SOLAS vision for the framework was communicated. A workshop hosted by SOLAS in July 2022 brought together around 80 stakeholders, including community education practitioners, government representatives, An Cosán, Aontas, and other community education partners. The primary objective was to discuss a definition for SOLAS-funded community education and the seven core principles identified in the strategy as a starting point from which to build a framework (Figure 2).

Opening the event was Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS, followed by Denis Leamy, CEO of Cork ETB. Two representatives of the Acorn Project, a community education partner in County Offaly, spoke at the event, providing insights from the perspective of a co-ordinator and a learner. The workshop facilitated in-depth conversations and extensive feedback. The event was closed by Nessa White, SOLAS's executive director of transformation.



Figure 1: Key features of community education (ETBI, 2021)

In keeping with the theme of collaboration, the next stage of the project was engagement with community education learners. Two online forums brought together learners from across the country. They followed a similar format to the workshop and allowed learners to contribute their voice, experiences, views, and visions for a Community Education Framework.

The collation of data collected from these stakeholder engagements, information sessions, workshop, and learner forums informed the next stage: writing a draft of the Community Education Framework. It is envisaged that a draft framework will be in place by the end of 2022, with further consultation workshops scheduled for early 2023.



Figure 2: Community Education Framework: suggested principles (SOLAS, 2020)

Conclusion

Developing a Community Education Framework offers an opportunity to record, reflect, and recognise the diverse nature of community education that exists across Ireland. The adaptability and flexibility that characterise the tailored approach in community education is built on a set of values that welcome and celebrate collaboration with learners and community partners. This will help ensure that provision is of the community, by the community, and for the community. Developing the Community Education Framework will amplify the voice of the diverse learners and, by extension, acknowledge the contribution that the sector plays across broader FET provision.

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Recognition of Prior Learning for the Irish Hospitality Sector

Developing a new framework to make skills visible

This article outlines a pilot RPL (recognition of prior learning) project for the Irish hospitality sector. The project used an industry-standards framework across all levels in the sector to capture on-the-job learning and make hospitality skills visible, for the benefit of both employees and employers. The project was carried out in collaboration with City and Guilds and the education and training boards of Kilkenny Carlow and Dublin Dun Laoghaire.



Eileen Cullen
Training Services &
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Our journey starts

Direct research with stakeholder groups and representative bodies in the Irish hospitality sector showed us that the challenges faced by the industry were significant. High employee turnover rates and a lack of transparency over employee skills levels presented difficulties with recruitment.

From the employees' perspective, many had developed high levels of skills but had not pursued education or training in a formal setting, so they had no qualifications or certification to validate their competencies and expertise.

Our team journey took us through the trials and tribulations of stakeholder delivery, riding the roller coaster of challenges and opportunities, agility, a growth mindset, and resilience. We count our blessings, recognising the opportunity provided through SOLAS's Innovation Through Collaboration funding 2019–2021 and through our collaboration with Kilkenny Carlow Education and Training Board (ETB), Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB, and our partners City and Guilds.

The project to develop a recognition of prior learning (RPL) framework for the Irish hospitality sector, with support from City and Guilds, was also informed by previous research into the skills needs of employment sectors in Ireland, outlined in the following reports:

- Hospitality Skills Oversight Group Report 2018
- Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland 2018
- The Mid-East Regional Skills Forum 2018
- Vacancy Overview 2018 – SOLAS/National Skills Council
- Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET): Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

The project tackled recommended actions in these reports and supported government policy strategies targeted at the following areas:

Skills shortages

- A shortage of hospitality talent, with a lack of people entering the industry to make up the shortfall. There were over 5,000 chefs required in Ireland alone.

Staff retention

- Staff turnover in hospitality is among the highest of all industries, at 30%–50% for entry level.

Career progression

- Because people can't see a clear route to better paid or management roles, they either leave the industry early – so there's no return on investment for the employer for their training – or they don't come to work in the industry in the first place.
- Hospitality is not seen as a 'proper', long-term career, but rather a poorly paid, low-skilled, short-term option. This leads to a loss of talent and to difficulty in recruiting at all levels.

Our team journey, driven by the impacts of the pandemic, saw us in kitchens, sitting rooms, and bedrooms as we navigated the new landscape of remote working.

Reduced talent pool

- With so many people entering and leaving the industry, there is a lack of visible talent for the whole industry to draw from. Talent may not be spotted, as a person's full range of skills and experience is not visible to an employer.
- Busy industry organisations are focused on guest experience and managing day-to-day operations, often neglecting their key assets. The value of a skilled workforce cannot be overestimated.

Too busy to develop staff

- A lack of alternative training options designed to meet the Irish hospitality sector has made it difficult to access training and development.

No RPL framework for hospitality skills

- Hospitality skills have little visibility. A great meal or service doesn't just happen, but the skill set used to create that experience is not very visible.

Novel approach

Using an industry-standards approach ensured buy-in from industry. Since most skills development happened in the workplace, it was essential

to capture the industry perspective rather than the national frameworks standards.

Digital credentials offered the ability to brand and market badges to a particular organisation, and allowed the linking of certification to digital platforms such as social media and professional profiles, making skills more visible.

Taking a different road

Disruption to the original plan due to Covid-19 gave our team further opportunities to adapt and respond to industry demands for online processes and portals, enabling the seamless provision of stakeholder service throughout the project.

Our team journey, driven by the impacts of the pandemic, saw us in kitchens, sitting rooms, and bedrooms as we navigated the new landscape of remote working. With the help of technology and project management tools, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, we navigated our project's twists and turns, modifying its objectives and delivery methods to keep moving forward.

Our team's ability to respond and adapt are testament to the team's own growth mindset and resilience, focused on stakeholders and the project deliverables. Stakeholder engagement was delivered through two routes: an individual route, whether employed or unemployed, and a corporate route, which targeted employers, training providers, and community organisations (Figure 1).

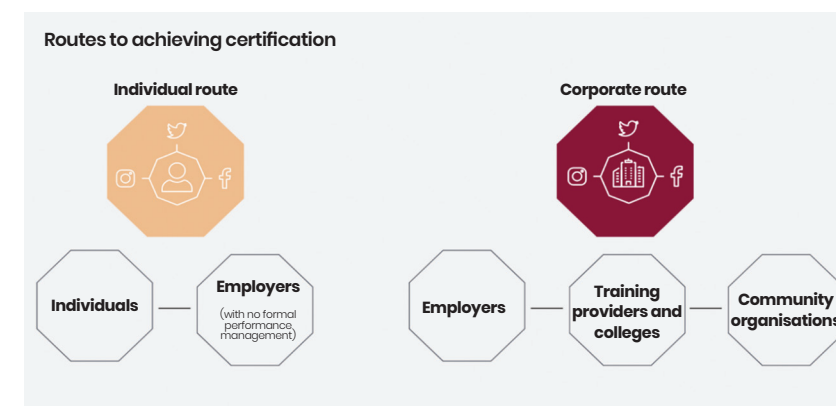


Figure 1: Routes to achieving certification

Digital credentials or badges were issued to successful applicants across various job roles, with a set of standards behind each role.

Every certification has its corresponding handbook that set out the skills, competencies, and knowledge required to attain a digital badge. To achieve certification, an applicant has to demonstrate competencies at three levels:

1. **Core skills:** Transferable skills which are required for all job roles as relevant to the level you are at.
2. **Role-specific skills:** Specific to the job role that the badge is issued against.
3. **Professional development:** Demonstrate understanding of the hospitality industry and progression opportunities. Demonstrate learning or training that has been undertaken to maintain or upskill.

Miles covered

The measure for success doesn't just sit with the certification of stakeholders; there are also the hard-working, dedicated employees in the hospitality business:

- The individual route for this pilot project saw 225 individual badges issued.
- The corporate route validated two hotels, which issued 96 certificates through their performance management process.
- Kildare Wicklow ETB, as a training provider, issued certification to 15 national commis chef learners; the programme was validated as a commis chef badge, which included substantial work experience over two years.

With a multitude of factors such as our own team-building experience, newfound skills, processes, networks, and the building of abilities, we met and tackled the barriers faced by stakeholders, be it lack of resources, digital skills or support. Key deliverables for this RPL project included:

- greater participation than expected
- establishment of advanced links with the hospitality sector
- development and adoption of RPL procedures that validate and credit experiential learning and skills development acquired on the job
- industry validation of the framework and procedures for RPL in the hospitality industry
- newly devised training programmes, developed and road-tested in collaboration with industry
- research and review compiled of employers' and employees' experiences and perceptions before and after the pilot programmes.

Many other projects and initiatives emerged from this work, such as the Developing Leaders in Hospitality programmes, and the Green Manager programme delivered nationally with 15 other ETBs, responding to gaps identified through this programme.



The road ahead

We rode the wave of research, applications, planning, budgets, learning, pivots, and success. On reflection, all was made possible through collaboration, team spirit, and creativity. Valuable learning and outcomes are embedded in the way our team thinks and operates. We are ready to meet the future challenges and the success of securing a second Innovation Through Collaboration project funding in the experience economy.

There are possibilities for other RPL frameworks in other sectors based on the principles and learnings from this project. Greater strategic partnerships and collaboration with our sister ETBs, industry bodies, and stakeholders, to meet future demands and growth, are the only way forward.

For more information, see:
<https://kwetbmarinehouse.ie/your-future-your-skills/>.

The project to develop a recognition of prior learning (RPL) framework for the Irish hospitality sector, with support from City and Guilds, was also informed by previous research into the skills needs of employment sectors in Ireland.



Minister Harris gets “SMART” at the FET Green Skills Summit, held in Wexford in March 2022

L-R: Paul Jackman, Vice President of the Irish Road Haulage Association (IRHA), Simon Harris TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and Sean Burke, Area Training Manager, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB)

SMART is the Eco Driving programme designed to reinforce good driver behaviours such as reducing speed which reduces fuel and emissions, thus saving costs and making our roads safer.

MSLETB, in collaboration with WWETB, partnered with employers and representatives of the Irish Road Haulage Association to develop the programme for HGV drivers (Heavy Goods Vehicles).

A second version of the Eco Driving programme has now been developed for the Coach and Bus sector in Ireland.

This initiative is funded through SOLAS Innovation Funding.



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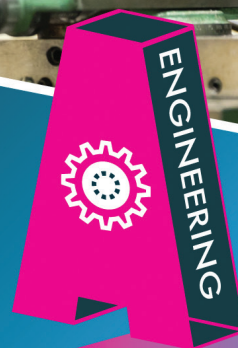
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5 Higher Education



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

Government identifies €307m gap in annual core funding and commits to closing it

HEA is 50 years old and Oireachtas passes HEA Bill 2022 based on collaborative governance model

New research policy, Impact 2030, published with SFI and IRC to be combined into single HE research funding agency





Avoiding the Tyranny of Uniformity

Why the distinct features of third-level providers should be nurtured

Moves to create a 'unified' tertiary education system in Ireland run the risk of losing the diversity and uniqueness of each part of the system. Further education must be developed as an attractive end in itself, while ensuring that pathways to higher education are provided for those who want to take that route. Equally, there is a need to differentiate the missions of technological universities from those of the more established universities. Specialisation and innovation will drive excellence. Bland uniformity will lead us towards the lowest common denominator.



Jim Miley
Director General, Irish Universities Association

Introduction

We're experiencing one of the most significant periods of change in Irish third-level education. At national level, we now have a dedicated government department (DFHERIS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) and a minister at the Cabinet table – a hugely welcome development for the sector and for the country as a whole. We have an updated legislative framework with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Bill 2022. The long-awaited government commitment to recognise and address the funding shortfall in higher education was finally confirmed in 2022. We now await delivery of the funding to close the €307m-per-year gap.

The creation of five new technological universities marks a significant change in the higher-education landscape. Across the wider third-level sector, the renewed prioritisation of apprenticeships under the National Apprenticeship Plan is a positive step to offering more diverse career options. The expansion of opportunities in further education is likewise welcome.

Much has yet to come. The delivery by government on its commitment to close the core funding gap will remain a priority in the immediate years ahead. A new Research Bill in 2023 will set the legislative framework for research and innovation for the longer term. The establishment of the new research funding agency, combining Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC), marks an important milestone. The development of a National Skills Plan that will emerge next year from the pending OECD Skills Report will have important implications for the sector. Other key policy initiatives – such as the rollout of the National Access Plan, an expansion in lifelong

learning provision, and the evolution of digital and blended learning – provide challenge and opportunity in equal measure.

The parts and the whole

A key overarching challenge, for both government (represented by DFHERIS and the various agencies) and the sector itself, is how best to bring together the different parts of the sector so as to optimise the opportunities and experience for students. This is the classic challenge of seeking to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. There is a real opportunity to foster innovation and to expand the choices and pathways for students in a reimagined third-level sector. Equally, there is a risk that diversity in the system will be lost if the wrong policy choices are made or if the distinct features of each part of the system are not nurtured and resourced.

DFHERIS is advancing proposals for a 'Unified Third-Level System'. Consultation has been undertaken, the results of which are due to be published by Minister Simon Harris before the end of 2022. Presumably, the outcome will shape, or certainly strongly influence, the policy direction on how the overall third-level system will develop and be resourced into the future.

“ **There is an absolute need to achieve better coordination across the third-level system.** ”

There is an absolute need to achieve better coordination across the third-level system. Minister Harris has rightly pointed to the skewed emphasis on going to college. He has pointed to a 'snobbish' culture in relation to higher education and the need to develop and encourage alternative pathways for school leavers. However, 'unification' of the system will not deliver that. What is required is better coordination and a removal of blockages in the pathways between different parts of third level.

While the overall ambition for better coordination is absolutely correct, the framing of this tertiary-education initiative under the term 'unified' is a mistake, at least in how it is presented. A dictionary definition of *unify* is 'to make or become united, uniform or whole'. Is uniformity what we need? Surely diversity and the enhancement of the unique capacity of each part of the third-level system are preferable?

There are two distinct elements to the uniformity challenge that is now arising. The first is to the need to develop distinct features for the different parts of the overall tertiary system. The second is the need to ensure that diversity remains a core feature of the higher education and university system in the context of the emergence of technological universities.

So, what about the first challenge? Higher and further education (FE) have their own distinct features and attributes. Further education must be developed and nurtured as an end in its own right, not just an alternative pathway into higher education. Yes, of course, some FE students may well go on to higher education. Our universities have had pathways in place for

many years with reserved places for FE students and are fully committed to optimising and expanding those pathways into the future.

The statistics on progression rates are good by international comparisons, but they also tell us that some students entering higher education are in the wrong place or the wrong course. We need to avoid placing people in higher education where this is not suitable. That can only be achieved by ensuring that the further education and apprenticeship options are positioned as valid and attractive options in and of themselves and not merely as second-choice pathways to higher education.

The uniformity challenge

The thrust to create viable alternative pathways for school leavers requires more than structural change. It also demands a change of culture across society. This cultural shift needs to be led from within the system, and it requires substantial change especially in the approach to career guidance in second level. The 2019 Indecon Review of Career Guidance, commissioned by the Department of Education, clearly identified the issues to be addressed and set down key recommendations on governance and delivery, career guidance tools and information, enhanced enterprise engagement, and the promotion of inclusion. Implementation of these recommendations needs to be accelerated.

“ **Further education and apprenticeship options must be positioned as valid and attractive options in and of themselves and not merely as second choice pathways to higher education.** ”

The synergistic benefits of the further and higher education sectors – where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – can only be realised if each part is functioning effectively in the first place. To enable this, the agreed funding deficits must be addressed, along with the structural and cultural barriers outlined above. That will then provide a fertile context for improved pathways and greater collaboration.

The second dimension of the uniformity challenge relates to the university sector. Five new technological universities have now been established. Their creation has received widespread political support, much of it based on the benefits of creating 'university towns' and the potential that this might offer. This is entirely valid. But there does not seem to be a widely understood or shared view of what makes these new universities different from the more established universities.

It is critically important that the focus and mission of technological universities be clearly articulated and understood. Many of the so-called traditional universities provide a range of courses and have advanced research capacity in technological disciplines, be it engineering, biopharma, information technology, robotics, medical devices, or otherwise. Some also have a strong regional footprint, and all have embedded relationships with enterprise.

So how will the new technological universities differentiate themselves and offer new and distinct elements of provision to their students and in their research activity? What is clear is that their missions, both collectively and individually, need to be distinctive if they are to pass the 'whole being better than the sum of the parts' test. Sameness and uniformity will not only fail to deliver additional benefit, it will also lead to unnecessary overlap and a waste of scarce resources.

The importance of diversity

The best universities in the world have distinctive features and are renowned for particular disciplines or courses. We cannot expect 10 or 12 Irish universities to be world-beaters in, say, cancer research. But it is entirely feasible and realistic to have one or two of our universities reach that goal while others focus on alternative specialties. Such distinctive excellence can only be achieved if it is appropriately resourced and in a system where individual university missions are nurtured. A uniform system does not enable that. The new System Performance Framework being developed by the HEA must also encourage this.

The capacity of universities, new or old, to achieve excellence also relies on a more devolved control structure. The new HEA Bill provides an opportunity to reset the operational relationship between universities and government. It provides a solid framework for accountability, with primary governance responsibility resting with the governing authority of individual universities. It is now essential that such devolved responsibility be enabled in a meaningful way by removing restrictive centralised controls such as the Employment Control Framework.

In summary, we need a system that fosters the growth of a diverse set of universities with differentiated missions. We need to identify and nurture the distinct features of the new technological universities and avoid a one-size-fits-all uniformity. And we need to ensure that the further education system is developed with its own clear mission, not just as a pathway to higher education. We do not need to unify those parts of the system. Rather, we need to ensure that they are closely coordinated and that the synergies between them are fully exploited.

The renowned Irish writer, artist, and nationalist George Russell, better known under the pseudonym *Æ*, once said that 'the worst tyranny is uniformity'. Let us avoid such tyranny in Irish third-level education and instead foster diversity and innovation.

“ Sameness and uniformity will not only fail to deliver additional benefit, it will also lead to unnecessary overlap and a waste of scarce resources. ”

Embedding Universal Design for Learning in HECA Colleges

An exploratory study

The Higher Education Colleges Association, through its Academic Quality Enhancement Forum, recently conducted an exploratory study demonstrating that since the pandemic, universal design for learning (UDL) has shifted from an ad hoc enhancement activity to a key strategic imperative across HECA colleges. This article describes the findings of that study, showing how UDL has advanced from piecemeal and niche activity to be increasingly a strategic priority.

Every opportunity to build upon the principles of UDL must be leveraged across the entire academic community. The assumption of homogeneity continues to be challenged – HECA classrooms are vibrant and diverse settings. It is important that this diversity is harnessed when facilitating students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competence. (HECA, 2021)

Introduction

A recent report by the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA, 2021) describes how 'alternative assessment arrangements advanced the UDL agenda by providing students with greater choice and variety to demonstrate what they knew in assessments' (p.28). The report endorses universal design for learning (UDL) as a 'framework for supporting student success' (ibid., p.37) and recommends that HECA colleges prioritise UDL at both programme and institution level.

The shift from ad hoc enhancement activities to strategic embedding of UDL was implicit in the study. Consequently, in summer 2022, HECA's Academic Quality Enhancement Forum Committee (HAQEF) began an exploratory study to investigate the positioning of UDL across HECA colleges.

Method

Three focus groups were conducted with participants from five of the twelve HECA colleges. Participants were staff working in executive, senior leadership, and middle management positions in operations, quality assurance (QA), programme management, and learning support, along with instructional designers. Some had lecturing duties. The five participating colleges offer programmes in business,



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ICT, and the humanities, leading to awards up to and including level 9 of the National Framework for Qualifications to approximately 20,000 learners.

Feedback was coded and analysed thematically, using the six-step framework created by Braun and Clarke (2006), then triangulated with the academic literature.

Universal design for learning

The concept of universal design originated in the context of improving the accessibility of buildings and products. In the 1990s, the Centre for Applied Special Technology created the CAST framework, incorporating guidelines that offer 'concrete suggestions for applying the UDL framework to practice and help ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities' (CAST, 2018).



A review of academic literature highlights numerous themes relating to UDL:

- AHEAD (2021b) reports a 226% increase in the number of students registering with disability support services in higher education in Ireland over the past 11 years.
- UDL supports all learners to do better (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

- Variety and choice in assessment are crucial to implementing UDL (AHEAD, 2021a).
- 'The multimodal nature of digital tools facilitates the integration of varied formats and flexible options into the learning experience' (Rao, 2021).
- Lecture capture aligns well with the principles of universal design (Watt et al., 2014).
- UDL can support other institutional priorities, such as culturally sensitive teaching (Kieran and Anderson, 2018).
- Quality frameworks combined with universal-design principles can enhance the online teaching and learning experience for learners (Robinson & Wizer, 2016).

SOLAS describes how the emphasis on 'flexible learning pathways . . . different modes of delivery . . . and a variety of pedagogical methods', as outlined in Quality and Qualifications Ireland's core criteria, aligns with UDL principles (QQI, 2016, cited in SOLAS, 2021, p.10).

Providers in QQI's Green Paper on Assessment (2020) advocate for implementing UDL approaches in assessment. More recently, the Higher Education Authority's National Access Plan 2022-2028 includes a commitment to a 'whole-of-institution approach to student success and universal design' (HEA, 2022, p.11).

Exploratory study findings

Codified and thematic analysis of focus group feedback revealed eight distinct themes, many of which align with findings from the literature.

Theme 1: The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated UDL implementation as a strategic priority on a whole-of-institution basis

'We want to make UDL a fully embedded part of college life. It's articulated in our Strategic Plan and Student Success Strategy.' (College 3)

'The embedding and articulation of UDL in strategies gives you a power in the context of implementation on the ground.' (College 1)

'UDL is not just a checklist, it's a mindset.' (College 4)

'The more UDL is linked to QA and becomes part of what we do, the more the need for accommodations will be reduced. We have just gone through a year of strategic planning. We want to make our plans in relation to UDL more explicit. The level of support that we offered during the pandemic has informed our strategic plan.' (College 4)

'HECA colleges had diverse assessment approaches accelerated by the pivot to emergency remote teaching.' (College 2)

Theme 2: QA processes further support the implementation of UDL

Participants described how QA processes drive increased accessibility and inclusive practice, albeit with further scope for improved alignment.

'Preparing for re-engagement was the real reset mode in relation to UDL.' (College 2)

'The annual reporting to QQI has also helped to accelerate the deeper embedding of UDL principles.' (College 2)

'Validation and programmatic review panels ask what is the profile of your learner and your graduate. These questions speak to inclusion.' (College 4)

'The QQI online-only pilot for short courses gave us key insights into how to engage learners, including learners with disabilities, in a purely online teaching and learning environment.' (College 3)

'The inspiration and aspiration are not always in line with the requirements of an accreditation body, as an example.' (College 4)

Theme 3: UDL is increasingly integrated into governance structures and QA policies

All participants indicated that UDL is prioritised by boards and committees, including academic councils, in HECA colleges. Larger HECA colleges have dedicated inclusion committees. Participants confirmed that their institutions' QA manuals do not include a dedicated UDL policy but do apply the principles of UDL across a range of policies. All colleges have a dedicated accommodations policy and staff with responsibility for accommodations. All agreed, however, that UDL has to be a collective responsibility.

'Awareness of UDL is strong, but full and consistent implementation of UDL remains an ongoing priority.' (College 1)

'The language of universal design is slowly making its way into policies and procedures.' (College 4)

Theme 4: Programme design is instrumental in UDL implementation

Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining a student focus and proactive instead of reactive approaches to UDL implementation. Also emphasised was the benefit of drilling into the CAST guidelines, not just the principles, when embarking on inclusive programme design.

'A fully fleshed out UDL approach with multiple pathways for action, expression etc., multiple means of navigation, can also be overwhelming for the learner . . . We do have to be careful not to overload.' (College 4)

'CAST can put a structure on what we are already doing.' (College 2)



Learner survey feedback, including from learners with specific needs, informs programme design, but fully embedding a student partnership approach remains a work in progress.

'We have learners with visual impairments, hearing impairments, etc. We have feedback from these learners already that we use to inform programme design.' (College 2)

'I am open to learners being involved in programme design, but you have to be very careful that you aren't designing a programme based around the needs of one or two learners.' (College 1)

'The holy grail of a fully collaborative design process with students is very difficult to pull off. We want to include the student voice, however.' (College 4)

Theme 5: Technology is a key enabler of UDL

Ensuring the technical competency of staff engaging with UDL was emphasised, along with providing access to the correct software for both learners and staff. Asynchronous learning was highlighted as a key UDL enabler.

'It took a global pandemic to bring about universal access to class recordings across the sector. They are so important.' (College 1)

'Gamification is good for UDL, as is storytelling.' (College 5)

'Our educational technologist is a key enabler of UDL. He is responsive to learner needs and keeps in close communication with them.' (College 2)

Theme 6: Educational initiatives and guidelines promote engagement with UDL

The importance of formal and informal supports came through strongly.

'There is a postgraduate programme of education within our college in which UDL is taught to staff.' (College 1)

'Informal meet-ups between colleagues to discuss UDL have also helped re implementation, supporting a cross-pollination of ideas across the college.' (College 1)

'We have a college-wide nourishing environment in relation to UDL. Approximately 40 staff have taken the National Forum and AHEAD digital badge in universal design. . . . The badge is embedded in our culture.' (College 1)

'We need to train all faculty to ensure that all learners receive an equitable teaching and learning experience.' (College 3)

'National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, AHEAD, and FET resources are hugely important for UDL implementation, a centre of gravity for UDL.' (College 5)

Theme 7: Diverse feedback mechanisms are central to advancing UDL

Participants highlighted the need to employ different feedback mechanisms to underpin effective engagement with UDL.

'Programme board meetings are an essential QA mechanism for ensuring that we have met the needs of our learners, including learners with disabilities. Learning analytics are also important.' (College 4)

'Our next step is to scaffold in the student voice.' (College 1)

'Anecdotal feedback is important. You also need to ask questions you can't ask on a feedback form. We need to have more focus groups with staff and learners and not just the feedback surveys. Equally, open-door policies where learners with disabilities can come and chat with us are so important.' (College 3)

'In our weekly operational meeting, faculty can feed back about learners with disabilities.' (College 4)

Theme 8: UDL forms part of an increasing focus on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

'There is some overlap between UDL and EDI. In our college, the EDI perspective is considered across college activities and committees. After every meeting, we ask, "What are the EDI implications of this?"' (College 1)

'We are currently training faculty in relation to gender issues and what is permissible to say and what isn't.' (College 2)

'UDL maximises the opportunity for learners to engage, but we will never see the situation where we don't have accommodations. We need to support all learners.' (College 4)

One college reflected on how UDL is an effective tool for overcoming barriers that may otherwise arise in supporting disabled learners in the absence of funding for learners with disabilities in private colleges.

'The principles of UDL in the context of curriculum helps to remove barriers in the absence of funding.' (College 1)

Conclusion

Feedback from an exploratory study with five HECA colleges indicates that UDL has advanced from piecemeal enhancement activity promoted by UDL

champions, and is increasingly a strategic priority. Engaging staff across a range of functions is evident, including quality assurance, library, learning support, and teaching and learning. A continued focus on implementation across all programmes and institutional workflows remains a priority, informed by sectoral developments and good practice as promoted by bodies such as AHEAD and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The findings of this study can inform the construction of a survey tool to test themes on a larger scale across all HECA colleges, providing an evidence-based framework for the strategic and cohesive implementation of UDL HECA-wide.

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Covid-19 and the Future of Online Learning

Now we can all teach online! But what happens next?



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Covid-19 has improved not only our skills in learning technologies but also our awareness of the possibilities. How should we in higher education be responding to the significant changes that are happening worldwide in online learning?

Introduction

Models of distance education stretch back to the 18th century. Correspondence courses that developed in the 19th century were highly successful and lasted well into the 20th century, when they started to absorb technological solutions such as radio in the 1930s, TV in the 1960s, and the World Wide Web in the 1990s (Tait, 2003). It was not until the communications revolution of the internet massively reduced the transactional distance between lecturers and students that one might claim these distance learning courses started to change dramatically.

Although the possibilities for richer communication improved as internet speeds increased, online programmes continued to wrap courses around highly designed materials. With the increased expectation of professional video and multimedia, the cost of creating these courses increased, making them unviable for smaller audiences. Around 2004, however, the cost and quality of videoconferencing greatly improved, and it became possible to teach 'live online' in a similar manner to classroom teaching. With a modest amount of training in live online teaching pedagogy and technology, and the addition of asynchronous tools, a lecturer could teach online as well as, if not better than, they might previously have taught an on-campus class.

This synchronous approach to online teaching was the model that emerged in the Institute of Technology Sligo (now Sligo College of the Atlantic Technological University) between 2002 and 2004. The approach gave lecturers the autonomy they were accustomed to in classroom teaching, and the tools and training available allowed them to enhance their teaching even further. ATU Sligo was one of the first higher education institutes in the world to adopt this mode of distance teaching, and since then it has become more common, particularly in Ireland, because of the low investment required to create an online course.

Rapid change

The Covid-19 emergency quickly converted virtually all academics to synchronous online teaching. The resulting unplanned learning experiences by staff with limited training were often of lesser quality than on-campus. Although this has been reasonably described as 'emergency remote teaching', that should not imply that competent synchronous online teaching is inferior when planned for and undertaken by trained staff.

Despite the challenges and shortcomings of online teaching during the pandemic, there have been positive outcomes. Both students and lecturers have gained a better understanding of how technology can enhance teaching and learning. Students across the world are now requesting that lecturers record their classes (Donnelly, 2021). Despite lecturers' reservations, this has been shown to improve performance and reduce stress for students who, for one reason or another, cannot attend classes from time to time.

“Despite the challenges and shortcomings of online teaching during the pandemic, there have been positive outcomes.”

Indeed, the recording of classes during the pandemic has removed the reservations of many lecturers, and many institutions are now developing agreed recording policies. Lecturers can enhance their courses by using additional techniques and tools. A more advanced example would be the implementation of a 'flipped classroom' model, using videos and quizzes to ensure they are viewed in advance of class.

The teaching experiences of lecturers and students during the pandemic may also have opened their eyes to possibilities (and necessities) beyond improving learning on campus. In the US it has had an impact on young students, with decreases in on-campus enrolment and an increase in the proportion of 18- to 23-year-olds enrolling in online distance programmes (Kelly, 2022). Lecturers may also begin to realise that more models of education are now possible and desirable than just the traditional campus model.

Lasting impacts

Perhaps the most immediate impact may be the conversion of part-time campus programmes, usually taken in the evenings or at weekends, to online programmes. Both lecturers and part-time students now know that attendance requirements can be much reduced if not completely removed. Although part-time students prefer face-to-face classes, they are usually highly motivated and busy people with full-time jobs, families, and hobbies. They will most likely prioritise convenience over perfection and opt for online programmes from elsewhere if their local institution does not provide it.

The state of online distance learning in higher education might now be simply described as divided into two main approaches. The primary approach is mainly from a smaller number of mostly larger providers, many

of which have long been active in distance learning. These institutions invest significant funding in creating content for more popular programmes and recoup this investment by delivering to larger audiences. But a very large numbers of institutions are developing new synchronous online programmes with minimal investment in an agile way, often in specialised fields, that can financially break even at relatively low enrolment levels. Now 'anyone can do it'.

In a similar way to how Amazon created an increased market for more obscure books, this long tail of specialised online programmes may reduce the demand for generic programmes from traditional providers, but at the same time increase overall demand for continuing education by facilitating access to many who previously did not have access.

New models of higher education

A new model of higher education is starting to emerge that may prove to be much more disruptive. When MOOCs (massive open online courses) became popular around 2002, it was rightly observed that these large-scale free courses had no associated credentials and would be of limited value. In time, these courses added assessment and started awarding micro-credentials for individual courses or coherent sets of courses. Although these courses were initially expensive to build, more recently it has been shown that they can be built more cheaply if TV production quality is not required.

It might be argued that although these courses are useful for professional development, they are no substitute for major awards from universities. But these courses have been used by some universities to develop techniques for teaching at scale, and full fee-paying programmes are emerging. The original 'degree at scale', an MSc in Computer Science from Georgia Tech, now has over 11,000 enrolled and at \$7,000 represents a significant threat to programmes elsewhere (Nietzel, 2021). This programme has been followed by many other postgraduate programmes on the edX and Coursera platforms. More recently the University of London published an undergraduate degree in Computer Science on the Coursera platform.

A significant part of the Atlantic Technological University's Higher Education 4.0 project (funded by the Human Capital Initiative) is to explore the possibilities for both campus and remote learning in these new models. In addition to exploiting synchronous teaching techniques to rapidly create online programmes in response to demand, the project will develop and document 'lean' processes for the rapid, low-cost development of reusable learning videos that can be used to facilitate asynchronous and other models of learning, including flipped learning, self-study courses for advanced entry into programmes, project-based programmes, and MOOCs.

“ Recently, the University of London published an undergraduate degree in Computer Science on the Coursera platform.

Other models are also being developed in the Higher Education 4.0 project which do not necessarily depend on reusable content, such as work-based degrees and micro-credentials as small as a single credit.

Future innovations

Many believe that micro-credentials will play an important role in continuing part-time education in the future (Caballero et al., 2022). They are a response to demands from employers for smaller and more relevant courses. Although many factors might affect the success of micro-credentials, an extremely important one is the use of digital credential infrastructure. An applicant for a job, or for entry into an educational programme, with a large set of smaller paper-based credentials will pose a challenge for evaluators. Digital infrastructure for issuing electronic credentials according to agreed standards will enable the development of systems for evaluation that automatically verify credentials and provide detailed information on learning outcomes and performance.

Micro-credentials could be considered a threat to higher education. Many existing micro-credentials from organisations like Microsoft or Google are highly valued alternatives to college courses. However, if higher education institutions develop their own micro-credentials, and enable these awards to be stacked alongside externally recognised credentials towards a major award such as a degree, they may prove to be a significant opportunity.

“ Micro-credentials could be considered a threat to higher education. However, if higher education institutions develop their own micro-credentials, they may prove to be a significant opportunity.

Innovation is not all about technology. To exploit these innovations, higher education may also need to innovate in our academic processes. While we may now be able to rapidly get an online course or programme up and running, employers do not generally consider higher education fast enough in responding to their needs. This may be because our processes for academic approval are too slow. We need to decrease the time required to approve major awards and develop separate, faster processes for the approval of micro-credentials. We also need to develop a faster way of testing and approving new models of online teaching, like the agile 'minimum viable product' approach used by entrepreneurs.

To quote Yogi Berra: 'Predictions are hard, particularly about the future.' But it is clear that there will a much greater variety of online learning models in this future, and we need to be able to continuously experiment and change to satisfy the needs of learners.

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28 November 2022

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) welcomed the announcement by Simon Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, of the green light to proceed to the next phase of the Galway City Campus Learner Centre project, under the Technological Sector Strategic Projects Fund (TSSPF).

How to Flourish in Third-Level Education

Just surviving is not enough

Third-level education is challenging for many students, so they brace themselves and aim to survive until graduation, when their lives truly begin. However, both universities and students can dare to believe that psychological flourishing is possible and can take steps to experience it in their college years. This article provides examples of how to do it.



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Thriving and flourishing

Surviving third-level education is not enough. We need to help students not only to survive but also to thrive and flourish at third level, especially given the rising rates of mental health issues and pandemic-related changes at teaching institutions worldwide, such as the increase in remote teaching – not to mention the rapidly climbing cost of living. We constantly focus our attention on the 20% of students who are not doing well, but we could pay more attention to the majority of students, helping them become the best versions of themselves and maintaining or improving their wellbeing.

Thriving is about being your best and getting the best out of your environment. In a recently published guide to feeling and doing well at university, psychologists share some tools available to help students thrive (van Nieuwerburgh & Williams, 2022). These include helping students learn by making small life changes; for example, ensuring good nutrition to keep their body healthy; avoiding multi-tasking, to improve cognition; and actively searching for opportunities that generate positive emotions, such as spending time with people and minding their emotional health. Third-level institutions can help students thrive by providing them with the right conditions and necessary knowledge, and by helping them tap into the best of what they can be.

Flourishing, on the other hand, is the optimal level of psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. It is a range of resources that students develop to help them cope more effectively with adversity and live a good life. The flourishing state may signify physical and psychological health, but only sometimes. Research shows that over 30% of those who showed signs of flourishing battled with mental health challenges, such as substance abuse (see Burke, 2020, for a review). Thus, flourishing and mental health issues are not mutually exclusive. They support each other in that the resources that flourishing people develop help them cope more effectively with other life challenges.

In addition to helping students cope with adversity, flourishing protects against mental health issues. In a recent longitudinal study, when flourishers' wellbeing declined, they were seven times more likely to develop depression two years later (Keyes et al., 2020). Thus, flourishing is a fluid state, with as many as half of flourishers declining in a decade (Keyes et al., 2010). Triggers such as distress experienced through education at third level can negatively impact people.

Wellbeing in education

Using a model created by Dempsey and Burke (2022), we considered four critical components that impact students' wellbeing in education:

1. Curriculum choices that make learning practical and relevant to young people's lives.
2. Pedagogical choices that help students create, enact, and experience knowledge.
3. Epistemic agency via collaborative learning with significant peer group interactions.
4. Relationships, be they intra- or inter-personal.

All these components play a significant role in students' learning experience and become the foundations for flourishing at the third level of education. Therefore, they should also be considered when designing a flourishing third-level education.

Finally, there are other ways in which third-level education institutions can enhance students' wellbeing and help them flourish. These include a range of activities that can become part of their educational experience, such as a mini-break for stretching every 20 minutes during a lecture, or wellbeing challenges such as conscious application of tools that students can use to enrich their lives.

Tools and activities for flourishing

Recently, my colleagues from the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and I compiled over 100 research-based tools for helping people flourish (Burke et al., 2023). They derive from positive psychology (the science of wellbeing) and lifestyle medicine (the science of lifestyle choices that prevent non-communicable disease such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and chronic lung disease). The six pillars of lifestyle medicine are nutrition, physical activity, stress management, quality sleep, positive relationships, and substance use.

Our latest research (Burke & Dunne, 2022) showed that even though lifestyle medicine relates mainly to people's physiological health, those who flourish psychologically are three times more likely to use three or more pillars of lifestyle medicine in their daily lives than those who are moderately well.

“When designing interventions to help third-level students flourish, it is essential to consider tools for both body and mind.”

“This tool asks students to consider what it would be like if everything went well for them... to imagine they are in excellent health, their studies are going well, and their friendships are thriving.”

Flourishers are also nine times more likely to use three or more pillars than those who are languishing (i.e., those who have lower wellbeing but not enough symptoms to diagnose with mental illness). Thus, when designing interventions to help third-level students flourish, it is essential to consider tools for both body and mind.

Here are a few adapted activities that lecturers and students could use in third-level education:

- *What Went Well (WWW)* – reflecting on the good things that happened that day. This activity is beneficial on days when things go wrong. It allows people to have a more balanced perspective on their situation. Instead of thinking narrowly of the bad things that happened, thinking more positively shows that amidst adversity, they also experienced good outcomes, or that there is more to their lives than what happened on this one bad day. This balanced view helps students develop optimism, allowing them to keep going in adversity.

- *Best Possible Self* – This tool asks students to consider what it would be like if everything went well for them. It encourages them to imagine they are in excellent health, their studies are going well, and their friendships are thriving. They have worked hard and accomplished all their goals. They are asked to imagine what it would feel like and to reflect on the critical steps they took to help them get there. Then they need to take 10 minutes to write what they have imagined. This activity can boost their positive emotions, but more importantly it can create hope and help students find pathways to get where they want to get.

- *Picture This!* – This tool encourages participants to create a picture diary of their 21 days on the campus, be it the first 21 days of an academic year, 21 days of preparing for exams, or 21 days of building friendships. They are asked to review them every evening, reminiscing on the meaningful events that happened to them, and once a week to share their pictures and meaning with their family or friends. This simple activity was used to help people realise their life's meaning and boost positive emotions, and it predicted that participants' eudaimonic wellbeing would increase the next day.

Conclusion

It is not one approach that will help us create a thriving and flourishing environment for lecturers and students, but a mix of all approaches relevant to individuals, institutions, and programmes. What matters is that we take the time to consider not only the reduction of illness, distress, and upset but also an increase of wellbeing and flourishing. Many people are capable of flourishing, but not enough people experience it. So what small things can you do today to help your people flourish at third-level education?

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My colleagues from the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and I compiled over 100 research-based tools for helping people flourish

Continuing Conversations

Post-pandemic teaching, learning, and assessment policies and practices in HECA colleges

In 2021, the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) undertook an analysis of the sectoral response to Covid-19. The processes and practices evidenced across the sector, during a time of great disruption, enabled the system to transform almost overnight. The analysis and reflection by staff and students, as part of HECA's Connected Conversations project, provided a snapshot of insights from educators and students teaching, learning, and supporting learning in HECA colleges during the pandemic.

Introduction

The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) was an active partner in the 2021 National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Next Steps project, which explored, at a national level, the teaching, learning, and assessment developments implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021).

HECA also undertook its own analysis of its member colleges' response to the pandemic, titled Connected Conversations (HECA, 2021). The processes and practices used across the sector, during a time of great disruption and change, enabled the system to transform almost overnight. The review and reflection undertaken by staff and students, as part of HECA's Connected Conversations research project, captured a snapshot of insights from educators and students on the teaching, learning, assessment, and learning support activities used in HECA colleges during the pandemic.

The aim of the research was to identify the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA) practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning due to Covid-19, and how these were experienced by educators and students in HECA colleges. The research also looked to identify the quality assurance and enhancement interfaces needed to facilitate the applied TLA practices and ensure ongoing academic standards.

To identify the specific TLA practices used, how these changed in relation to earlier practices, and what innovations had occurred, the following research questions were explored:

- I. What were educators' experiences of delivering these TLA practices?
- II. What were students' experiences of these TLA practices?
- III. What were student support staff experiences of these TLA practices?



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This research endorsed HECA educators' demonstration of reflective practice, responding to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic with agility and purpose. As a result, there is a wealth of rich information that shows what worked well and should be kept, what needs to be improved upon or developed further, and what needs to be dropped. These *continuing conversations* are crucial in facilitating a shared vision of what the post-pandemic higher education landscape could and should look like.

Pandemic changes

As confirmed in the Connected Conversations project (HECA, 2021):

the pandemic brought change and disruption that unearthed a wide range of taken-for-granted truths in higher education. How and when students learn, how educators facilitate this learning, and the spaces within which this happens, has changed. Learning in an online environment does not preclude being on-campus. The campus experience is now, more than ever, multidimensional and must reflect both the diversity of teaching and learning activities and the social fabric that knits contemporary community values for all staff and students.

As the academic community redesigned the learning experience, to maintain provision, colleges further developed their capacity to deliver programmes using blended and other online learning models. This ignited a conversation about the shared definition and understanding of *blended learning*, and how this might best be interpreted and applied.

With the return to face-to-face teaching, many HECA students signalled a preference to retain elements of online learning. Many programmes accommodated this, where possible and applicable. For example, some modules used a flipped-classroom approach, where material is loaded to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), with class time dedicated to active learning activities to engage students, or where communities of practice and peer sharing were implemented in novel ways using supporting technologies.

HECA students quickly adapted to and embraced blended and hybrid learning environments. There is a strong preference in the HECA sector to retain and develop both these programme delivery models, along with a *fully online programme* facilitation. The ongoing online programme project in Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), to support programme development and validation and to ensure effectiveness and integrity for online learners, is a positive development in this area.

In maintaining *programme review, revalidation, and validation* activities during the pandemic, HECA colleges engaged with QQI and peers to develop an online process for conducting panel events, through an online conferencing application. The processes have been embraced by college

“The experiences of remote teaching and learning encouraged timely conversations about assessment.

management and programme teams, the panels themselves, and the validating bodies. One benefit is that virtual events support attendance by a broader geographical spread of panel members, including international participants. Electronic provision of documentation supports responsiveness, sustainability, and economic aims. Virtual attendance also eases scheduling of stakeholder attendance, without significant disruption to their routines. To mainstream this initiative, the process needs to be formally integrated into colleges' and accreditation bodies' quality assurance procedures.

Colleges must also continue to consider how best to support the many *flexible and varied* ways that students engage with their learning. Spaces need to be created to support social and learning interactions. There is a need to reiterate and redefine the broadest possible definition of these spaces, for example, social engagement across campuses, both on and offline. The design and co-creation of these spaces between students and staff are crucial.

The experiences of remote teaching and learning encouraged timely conversations about assessment. Students and staff continue to value assessment as a major area worthy of focus and effort in the changing teaching and learning landscape. Supporting a *choice and variety of assessments* involves student consultation, awareness of the role of universal design for learning (UDL), a commitment to authentic assessment, and a critical evaluation of the suitability of chosen (existing) assessment methods. The pandemic precipitated urgent redesign of assessment, to facilitate learners' demonstration of their learning efforts without compromising on quality.

As we develop and enhance curricula, and the spaces in which these are delivered, we must renew our commitment to develop *student learning supports* to help students develop self-regulation skills, promoting student agency and autonomy as critical skills required for academic success, while also supporting student engagement and collaboration. The provision of these supports is a clear response to the changing learning landscape, with blended delivery models and the changing nature of how students manage their learning. Today's higher education learner needs to respond to different challenges from those in the past, and curricula must be designed with this in mind.

Challenges and future needs

New challenges exist in preserving and promoting *academic integrity*, at a time when essay mills and the use of social media to advertise these services and to actively target vulnerable learners are very real and present threats to all students. The development of more resources is urgently required to guide, inform, and support staff and students in this area, supporting a prevention-first model. Sharing of best practice across the sector, such as currently supported by the National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN), will once again be needed to strengthen this messaging.

During the pandemic, HECA colleges adopted an agile approach to trialling *new digital resources* and software, with one educator saying they had access to over 300 technologies to support learner engagement. There is a recognised need to continue to provide associated resources and facilitate guidance and training opportunities which will empower educators to produce teaching and assessment materials that enhance the learning experience, while making the best use of the technology available.

With the transition to online teaching and assessment, and learner support, *the communication modes between educators and students*, and within staff peer groups, also moved online. The resulting shift in communication practices needs to be evaluated to identify future needs. A significant *increase in administrative workload* was reported for educators during emergency remote teaching, driven primarily by redesigning assessments and an increased level of individual correspondence with students. The blurring of boundaries between formal and informal communication was noticeable in student-to-educator communications, as was the expectation for responsiveness.

Connected conversations (HECA, 2021) noted that *academic supervision* and other one-to-one engagement flourished in the online setting, benefiting from the ability to schedule meetings more easily, share files, and offer online feedback, improving the overall supervisor-to student relationship and workflow. Examination and development of communication policies and practices at institutional and programme level should ensure the continued appropriateness of communication and engagements, and support peer networks and communities of practice.

Conclusion

The Connected Conversations project has shown the need for ongoing dialogue, cross-collaboration, and meaningful partnership among all higher education institutions, to support knowledge sharing and mutual support, to co-create solutions to our collective challenges. The HECA Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF) continues to carry out the conversations that arise from the mutual sharing of experiences in member colleges, with specific plans in place to foster that activity for the current academic year.

Opening channels of dialogue acts as an agent of change. Events of the past two years have highlighted the community value of HECA providers to communicate authentically and openly with each other, harnessing lessons learned and building a collective consciousness that feeds into every aspect of the teaching, learning, and assessment landscape. Maintaining this momentum, as we look to the future, is critical for the continued changes, challenges, and celebrations that are yet to come. Continued sectoral partnership is an essential condition in ensuring that post-pandemic teaching, learning, and assessment in Irish higher education are based on the sector's real-time experiences, and continue to transform and enhance the learner experience.

The Remarkable Legacy of Veronica Dunne

A role model for everyone involved in education

This short account pays tribute to the life and legacy of Veronica Dunne, singer and singing teacher, who passed away in 2021. It outlines her career and the International Singing Competition that bears her name, and it describes the influence she has had on the world of singing both in Ireland and around the world.

The remarkable legacy of Veronica Dunne – often described as an Irish national treasure – lives on through the International Singing Competition which is named after her. The competition continues to attract top opera singers and rising young tenors, baritones, sopranos, and mezzos from all over the world. This year was no exception.

When Veronica passed away in April 2021, President Michael D. Higgins said she had 'captivated millions with her singing'. As a teacher and mentor she had unlocked the talents of many others with her enthusiasm, energy, and commitment.

Her former students include Suzanne Murphy, Celine Byrne, Imelda Drumm, Tara Erraught, Anthony Kearns, Ronan Tynan, Finbar Wright, Frank Patterson, Angela Feeney, Howard Reddy, and hundreds of others. Dana (Rosemary Scallon) also used her as a voice coach. Before she died, Veronica proudly admitted that she had taught the grandchildren of her first students.

The triennial Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition, established by the Friends of the Vocal Arts in Ireland in 1995, awards prizes to the last six finalists in each competition. Recipients have included Orla Boylan, Sarah-Jane Brandon, Tara Erraught, Pumeza Matshikiza, and Nadine Sierra, among many others.

The final in 2022 was staged with the National Symphony Orchestra at the National Concert Hall and was broadcast worldwide by RTÉ Lyric FM. Ronnie, as she was known to her many friends, had received the National Concert Hall Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

This year's first prize of €10,000 went to 24-year-old Armenian baritone Grisha Martirosyan. Second prize of €5,000 went to 25-year-old Irish mezzo-soprano Aebh Kelly, while the third prize of €4,000 went to 27-year-old British tenor Aaron Godfrey-Mayes. Latvian soprano Laura Lolita Perešivana (27) won the fourth prize of €3,000, while the fifth prize of €2,000 was won by 24-year-old Polish



John Walshe
Education Journalist

mezzo-soprano Zuzanna Nalewajek. The sixth prize of €1,000 went to bass-baritone Changdai Park (29) from South Korea.

The jury members were Jane Carty (chair); conductor Richard Bonyngé; mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught; Christina Scheppelmann, general director of Seattle Opera; David Gowland, artistic director of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House; Isla Mundell-Perkins, casting director of Staatsoper Hamburg; and Jonathan Friend, artistic advisor of the Metropolitan Opera House.

The Friends of the Vocal Arts is chaired by Professor Diarmuid Hegarty, who is best known as the founder and president of Griffith College – Ireland's largest independent higher education college, with campuses in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick. He spends considerable time and energy raising funds every year to support young opera singers worldwide.

'Ronnie devoted her long life to the training and mentoring of young voices,' Professor Hegarty says. 'I was delighted to join the Friends of the Vocal Arts to help her administer and fund opera students in Ireland.' In 1995, when Veronica donated €25,000 from her retirement testimonial concert to the competition, it went international.

'Ronnie's thinking was to give young Irish opera singers the opportunity to perform on a world stage at leading opera

“Veronica Dunne was an extraordinary woman – her charisma was larger than life. She was a singing teacher par excellence for years and years.”



American Baritone Grisha Martirosyan, winner of the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition (VDISC) 2022, with Dearbhla Collins, Artistic Administrator of VDISC, and Professor Diarmuid Hegarty, Founder and President of Griffith College and chair of Friends of the Vocal Arts.

houses and conservatories and get them training placements,' Professor Hegarty continues. 'We at Griffith College agreed to become lead sponsor – and I am so happy to say that it has been responsible for the advancement of so many young Irish singers.

'She was an extraordinary woman – her charisma was larger than life. She was a singing teacher par excellence for years and years. Hers was a name synonymous with good teaching. She was mother, father, mentor, and general minder to her students.' On one occasion, she even bought a tuxedo for one of her students so that he could perform in concert.

Veronica herself won her first prize at her debut as Mimi in *La Bohème* at the Teatro Nuovo in Milan in the early 1950s. She sang at Covent Garden with Kathleen Ferrier and Joan Sutherland, with whom she had a long friendship. Joan's widower, Richard Bonyngé, became one of the greatest supporters of the International Singing Competition.

Veronica Dunne also befriended the legendary Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, who was rightly revered for saving thousands of Jewish and Allied lives during the Second World War. Not for nothing was he dubbed the 'Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican', having evaded capture despite constant attempts to arrest him. After the war, in spring 1947, Ronnie accompanied him, at his request, to the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome. Here, just three years earlier, 332 Italians had been executed and buried by the SS in reprisal for the death of 33 SS troopers. Ronnie was overwhelmed by the scene. As her tears began to flow she noticed that the Monsignor was also crying.

This was the unusually brave man who had a huge price on his head during the war and who was later honoured by both the UK and the US with a CBE and a Medal of Freedom. 'My measuring tape for heroism has always been and will always remain a good priest from Kerry who during extraordinary times was, quite simply, an extraordinary man,' she recalled later. He became an inspiration for her, and she in turn became a gifted and inspiring educator whose name became synonymous with great teaching.

Over the years, Veronica Dunne had numerous broadcasts on RTÉ and the BBC; she visited the US and appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on television. She sang oratorios in England, Belgium, and Germany, touring with Sir John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra.

In 1961, Ronnie moved into teaching and joined the staff of the Dublin Institute of Technology College of Music as its only voice teacher. Since that time, she has taught nearly every major Irish singer. She built a successful vocal department and developed the Repetiteur system, teaching and training vocal coaches and accompanists to vocalists. In addition to teaching at the College of Music, she was on staff at the Leinster School of Music and the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

'She was a unique person, totally dedicated and committed to her teaching and to her students,' Professor Hegarty recalls. 'She is a role model to us all in education.'



Convocation: Hundreds march in procession in major event to mark UL's 50th anniversary

UL Founding President Emeritus Dr Ed Walsh with UL President Professor Kerstin Mey ahead of the UL50 Convocation.

Speaking at the Convocation, UL President Professor Kerstin Mey talked about the extraordinary growth of the institution over the past 50 years and outlined ambitious plans including a commitment to anchor sustainability in all future development activity at the University.

"This public university, the first one founded after the independence of Ireland, came into being through the determination of the people of Limerick to serve as a catalyst for the economic and social transformation of the Mid-West by developing graduates with much needed skills and an outlooking mindset.

"Building on and developing the talent of staff and students has been a key ingredient for the innovation of education brought about by UL since its inception: Cooperative Education, modularisation, continuous assessment, semesterisation and a strong commitment to student and staff exchanges in Europe and worldwide.

"It is our responsibility to take bold action – to have the courage to explore the unknown, to test the boundaries of existing knowledge and to excavate lost knowledge. It is our collective responsibility to pioneer and lead a better path forward."

Designing Futures

Infrastructuring innovation in Irish higher education

This article introduces the University of Galway's Designing Futures programme, a new educational programme that will prepare students to deal with today's complexity and uncertainty and the future world of work. The programme has been funded for five years (2020–2025) through the Human Capital Initiative. It has been developed to enhance the employability of university graduates by offering additional practical and creative teaching, learning, and skills development alongside traditional degree studies.

The Designing Futures programme at the University of Galway is an institution-wide initiative that is transforming and enhancing the student learning experience, while providing opportunities and supports to university faculty to fundamentally change, and hopefully augment, their teaching.

Open to all University of Galway students and staff, Designing Futures comprises a suite of complementary and connected initiatives and modules, focused on developing the attributes, dispositions, and skills required of graduates for living and working meaningfully and productively in the complex and challenging world of today and tomorrow.

Designing Futures (DF) is a flagship programme which received €7.57m in funding through the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3 by Ireland's Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2020). It is predicated on a number of core innovations, including a new entrepreneurial learning space in the heart of campus, the IdeasLab; a radically new approach to student learning called VIP (Vertically Integrated Projects); and a world-renowned career and personal coaching programme developed by Stanford University called Design Your Life.

Underpinning the entire DF initiative at University of Galway are design thinking, and creative and innovative approaches to student engagement, learning, and teaching. Designing Futures is fundamentally a participatory project, facilitating new ways for students and staff to collaborate and learn together, and thereby helping to create a new community of learning on campus. Furthermore, as we outline below, it represents a new way of connecting with key local, national, and international partners in enterprise and industry in new forms of collaboration, enhancing the relationship between 'town and gown'.

Before the global Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted the education of approximately 1.6bn learners worldwide, the Irish government



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issued a call for funding, the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3, for innovative programmes that would help transform higher education in Ireland. The call was in no way connected to Covid-19, as this was unanticipated at the time, but its aim was to support novel programmes and initiatives to prepare graduates to deal with the challenges and complexities of life and the workplace.

Funded projects would have to succeed, of course, by fulfilling or exceeding their key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics. But there was also the expectation that they would push the boundaries and possibilities of higher education in Ireland, particularly in realising new models of student engagement and learning, and new ways of partnering with enterprise, cultural, and societal partners. Thus, an acceptable level of strategic risk was acknowledged for these projects, in delivering on the imperative to do something innovative and different and offer a different vision of university education for the 21st century.

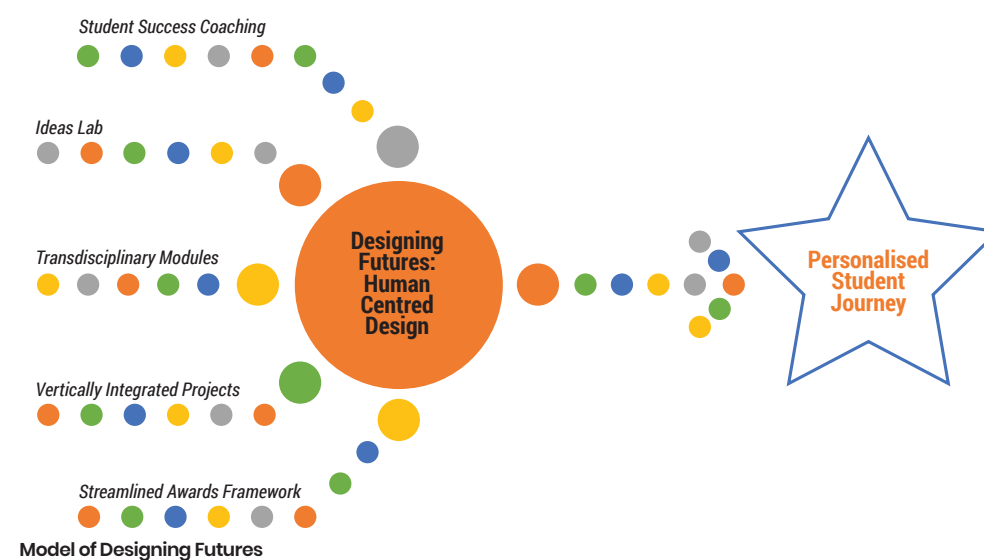
Research shows that future jobs will necessitate new ways of learning, more connected to work and life beyond academe, and transversal skills development, which crosses, incorporates, and synthesises different disciplines and specialisms, with a particular emphasis also on interpersonal and collaboration skills, higher-order and critical thinking, and system skills (Bakhshi et al., 2017). The challenges of the modern world necessitate new ways of thinking and new models of learning in the university and tertiary education sector. Salmon (2019) has drawn attention to the imperative to unbundle the traditional university – to challenge and break down the boundaries and academic silos that exist between different academic disciplines.

Core to the vision of Designing Futures is the educational design concept of *infrastructuring*: that bringing about transformative educational change involves successfully coordinating a range of impactful, mutually enhancing initiatives in a sustainable and scalable approach, with parity of esteem and true partnership among stakeholders. Delivering the innovative DF programme therefore entails close collaboration between students, university management, professional services colleagues, and academic faculty. DF also extends beyond the walls of University of Galway, connecting the university with key enterprise partners, including nine named industry partners: Boston Scientific, Vervan, Aerogen, Channel Mechanics, mBryonics, SAP, Galway International Arts Festival, Rent the Runway, and Medtronic.

Designing Futures has changed how the University of Galway engages with enterprise on graduate employability. It is moving us from a transactional model to a fully developed and cohesive framework for partnership. The target population is current undergraduate students at the University of Galway, with particular emphasis on students in an un-denominated programme in the Arts and Science schools. DF is at an early stage of implementation, with most initiatives in development. It has the following objectives:

Delivering the innovative Design for Learning programme entails close collaboration between students, university management, professional services colleagues, and academic faculty.

- differentiation of the University of Galway student experience
- student-centred transdisciplinary learning
- sense of belonging and ownership for students
- clear personal pathways and supports
- increased retention and progression
- open curriculum that makes the most of a generalist university experience
- enterprise integration through managed engagement
- preparation for life after university: from employability to personal empowerment
- clearer signposting of professional skills achievements to potential employers.



The figure illustrates the main components of the DF programme as it is implemented over a five-year time frame. Each component is defined below.

Student Success Coaches support students to take an active role in 'designing their lives' in order to achieve their unique academic, personal, and life goals during their time at university. Support sessions can be delivered either one-to-one or in group or workshop format. Students can work with a coach to:

- navigate their successful transition into university life and community
- increase their self-awareness with the aim to maximise their interests, talents, and values
- make decisions about their educational and professional goals, including module choices
- explore co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities, e.g., societies, clubs, and peer learning, that can complement and support their degree, or just to connect students more closely with fellow students and their university community.

IdeasLab activates and cultivates a community of curious and innovative minds across the campus. *IdeasLab* nurtures and supports students to develop skills to explore new possibilities with real-world impact. It offers educational programming and events, enterprise-specific activities, and funding supports to inspire and develop creative and innovative confidence in our student and enterprise communities. The approach taken within the unit is based on applying human-centred design (Brown, 2008).

Transdisciplinary Modules enhance students' professional skills, designed by experts from across the university and with input from our enterprise partners. Modules include Design Your Life, Design Thinking, Digital Citizenship, Global Engagement, Scalable Technology-based Innovation, Communicating through Storytelling, Introduction to Sustainability, and Megatrends. These modules are available for credit and are delivered to students in transdisciplinary settings, where they engage with students and faculty outside their main academic assignment.

Vertically Integrated Projects (VIPs): Through VIPs, students work in teams with faculty on multidisciplinary, longitudinal research projects to address grand challenges. Students earn credits and can participate in multiple semesters, with returning students taking on additional leadership/project responsibilities. 'Vertically Integrated' refers to VIP team compositions, which can include undergraduate, postgraduate (taught), and research students and university staff. This approach originated in Georgia Institute of Technology, USA (Strachan et al., 2019). During DF, the University of Galway will join the international VIP consortium.¹

Awards Framework: A streamlined Student Award Framework will be introduced to recognise students' personalised skills development and achievements (curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular).

DF's key focus is student engagement, predicated on the latest educational research and higher education policy, which identifies student engagement as an ongoing challenge for higher education institutions, both in Ireland and internationally. During the project implementation, the team will maintain an evidence base of project implementation and learning as it unfolds, and will collate evidence to support the project's sustainability. The following research objectives have been identified:

1. To undertake a formative evaluation tracking the development of project context, implementation, and participation.
2. To explore the perspectives of students, staff, and enterprise partners regarding their experiences of DF.
3. To explore whether participation in *IdeasLab* fosters the development of the entrepreneurial potential and innovative competencies of the students who take part.²
4. To reflect on how DF initiatives can be conceptualised, enhanced, and further developed.

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ENDNOTES

1. www.vip-consortium.org/
2. This objective is informed by the Entrepreneurial Potential and Innovation Competences (EPIC) assessment tool available through www.heinnovate.eu. The EPIC tool is used in this evaluation, alongside a number of additional data streams.

There is the expectation that funded projects will push the boundaries and possibilities of higher education in Ireland, particularly in realising new models of student engagement and learning, and new ways of partnering with enterprise, cultural, and societal partners.

ALIGHT Your Team with Positive Leadership



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This article makes the case for positive leadership as a necessity in educational institutions. It outlines the benefits of this approach, presents a model for applying it, and describes how this plays out at the author's own institution, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Positive leadership

Positive leadership is not a choice but a necessity in this rapidly changing social and educational environment. It refers to (1) positively deviant performance, (2) affirmative bias, and (3) facilitating the best of the human condition (Cameron, 2008). In a pre-Covid-19 survey, most aspiring educational leaders said they wanted to manage a mediocre team (Burke, 2020). They said it would be significantly more challenging to lead an underperforming organisation, whereas managing a top organisation would come with additional pressure to keep its highly regarded position.

Positive leaders think differently. They aim for deviant performance, they strive for their team to be extraordinary, and they do it by focusing on their own strengths and facilitating their team's strengths.

While the concept of positive leadership derives from the School of Education at the University of Michigan, most research and publications in this area refer to leadership in the corporate sector. Nonetheless, in recent years, a surge of interest has seen researchers applying it eagerly in an educational context and promoting positive universities, for example the University of Buckingham.

The ALIGHT model

Murphy and Louis (2018) created a model that helps school leaders tap into their people's potential. Burke (2020) expanded the concept of positive leadership into a range of positive behaviours that allow educational leaders to use their emotional, intellectual, and psychological resources more effectively. Recently, a new model of ALIGHT Positive Leadership was introduced that helps leaders maximise their resources to achieve extraordinary performance (Lucey & Burke, 2022).

The ALIGHT model has six components (Figure 1):

1. Abundance
2. Limberness
3. Inspiration
4. Grand Design
5. Health
6. Tribe

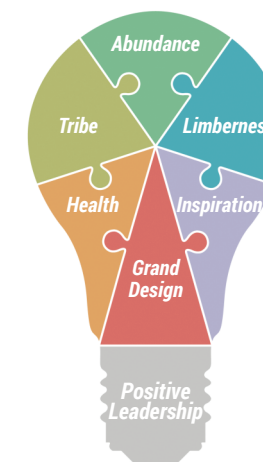


Figure 1: The ALIGHT model

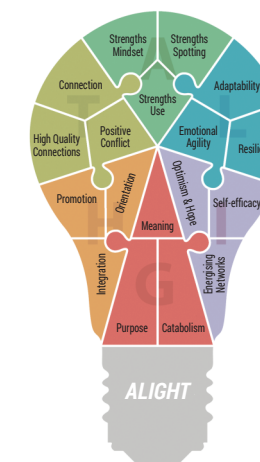


Figure 2: ALIGHT model subcomponents

Each component has three subcomponents (Figure 2). Components and subcomponents are resources that leaders can tap into to optimise their own and their team's performance.

Components of the ALIGHT model

Abundance

Positive leaders in third-level education can recognise their strengths and the strengths of others. Focusing on weaknesses comes easily as we navigate the world, avoiding danger. Reflecting on strengths is like reaching for higher-hanging fruit, especially when life gets tough. We need to make more effort to do it, but the reward will be sweet.

Using our strengths energises us and allows us to tap into the best versions of ourselves. It is transformational for many people, as we are at our best when using our strengths. Yet sometimes our mindsets stop us from getting there. It happens when leaders do not believe that playing to one's strengths makes a difference to a person or a team. Thus, recognising strengths is not enough. Believing that they can change, then sitting down and planning how they can be applied in everyday life, is what makes a difference.

Limberness

Positive leaders practise limberness, an ability to adapt and be emotionally agile and resilient in changing contexts. Adaptability is a leader's ability to shift their behaviour or mindset purposefully when facing changes. Some leaders take their time and resist change, leading to inertia and subsequent frustrations. Others review their circumstances and promptly adapt, which helps their team follow and embrace change. Even if leaders are cognitively prepared to adapt, their emotions may not allow them to do so. This is where emotional agility comes in handy. Positive leaders use their emotions wisely. They are aware of them and choose a reaction that better fits the situation rather than allowing emotions to overtake them. They also practise resilience by learning and growing from their experiences, be they positive or negative.

Inspiration

Inspiration is a resource that positive leaders use regularly. It is not about being inspirational; rather, it is a resource that helps leaders move their teams to action. Positive leaders understand the power of self-efficacy. When their team members believe they can accomplish a goal, they are more likely to take decisive action and succeed. So leaders work hard to help their teams believe they have all the resources they can have to accomplish their goals.

“Inspiration is about leaders practising optimism and hope and helping their team experience it.”

Inspiration is also about leaders practising optimism and hope and helping their team experience it. Optimism is the belief that everything will work out well. Having optimism makes us try harder to change our circumstances. Hope is about having the will and coming up with a way to accomplish something. Finally, a positive leader creates energising connections on their team. They ensure that team members are not surrounded by those who are sapping the energy out of them. Instead, everyone creates a network that brings about inspiration and positive change.

Grand Design

This resource is a leader's ability to transform day-to-day activities into meaningful contributions. It is also an ability to translate the team's meaning and purpose into daily actions. This dance between a bigger picture and practice is a challenge for many. Sometimes leaders excel at creating meaning but cannot translate it to their team. Other times, they take meaningful daily actions but cannot tie them to the bigger picture. Thus, positive leadership involves a leader's understanding of their significant contribution to their team and the meaning of each of their members' contributions. The leader can also connect each person's daily actions to the team's or the institution's mission and vision. It is about making meaning practical.

Health

Healthy leadership is not only about health promotion, which refers to actions that leaders take to promote healthy lifestyles in an organisation. It is also about engaging in health-oriented behaviours: the small actions that leaders take to ensure a healthy environment for their team. The difference between them is that health promotion requires words, whereas

health orientation requires actions, demonstrating that positive leaders care about their teams. But all this is not enough. Following the theory of salutogenesis, positive leaders practise full integration of health in their daily work. They promote health in their daily interactions with staff. They put their health first and help their staff make sense of daily events to ensure healthy outcomes.

Tribe

Positive leaders can assess, initiate, foster, develop, and redevelop relationships to meet their own needs and the needs of their team and organisation. They ensure daily caring interactions with their team members and connect with others meaningfully. High-quality connections do not mean that team members are best friends. Often they do not know much about each other's personal lives. Instead, it is an approach to working together and getting the best out of each other by nurturing mutual respect, trust, and belonging.

Positive leadership at the RCSI

The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland recently became a positive organisation where positive leadership is practised daily and positive organisational outcomes are assessed annually. Our Centre for Positive Psychology and Health specialises in not only promoting positive health but also practising it daily. Each staff member is a positive leader in their role. We include all our staff, including PhD scholars, in our weekly meetings to ensure full transparency of practice and to help each team member learn and embrace our positive culture. We start every meeting by reflecting on what went well for us as a team and individually in the last week.

We play to our strengths when contributing to our team. We make important decisions as a team, and every person's views are acknowledged and respected at all times. We are in it together and eager to help each other out for the good of our work and, most importantly, for the benefit of the people we help. This inspires us to keep going, learning, creating, and connecting. It gives us the meaning we need and makes us stronger as we support each other to ride the waves of change together. Positive leadership is not only a model but an invaluable resource that changes people's lives. It is a guide to getting the best out of everyone and our lives.

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Noted Irish Educationalist is conferred as Professor following 22 years as Founder and President of Hibernia College

Dr Seán M. Rowland (centre) was conferred as professor in recognition of his valuable contribution to higher education in Ireland. The accolade was presented by Dr Mary Kelly, academic dean at Hibernia College, and its chief executive officer, David Carpenter, at its annual conferring ceremony held in Dublin's Convention Centre on 25 November 2022.

Dr Seán Rowland is widely recognised as one of Ireland's most innovative figures in education. Born in Castlebar, Co Mayo, he is viewed as a driving force for change in third-level education in Ireland.

In 2000, Dr Rowland brought together colleagues from the corporate, education, and technological communities to establish Hibernia College, Ireland's first and only accredited online third-level institution.

Under Dr Rowland's presidency, Hibernia College developed into an award-winning provider of third-level blended learning programmes, the best known of which are its initial teacher education courses, whose graduates are now highly sought after by schools around Ireland.

Hibernia College also offers flexible programmes for graduate, postgraduate, and professional learners in data analytics, inclusive and special education, and the most recently introduced BSc (Hons) in General Nursing degree programme.

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6 Research



THEMES AND TRENDS IN 2022

The publication of Impact 2030, a new national strategy for research and innovation.

The decision to amalgamate the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland.





Impact 2030: Government's Vision for the Future of Research and Innovation



In this article, Professor Nolan reflects on two milestone developments in the Irish research world in 2022: the publication of Impact 2030, a new national strategy for research and innovation, and the decision to amalgamate the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland. These ambitious moves offer opportunities for a step change in Ireland's approach to research and a necessary transition to a sustainable way of living.



Prof Philip Nolan
Director General,
Science Foundation
Ireland

Introduction

2022 saw two very significant developments that will do much to strengthen and develop research and innovation in Ireland, with the potential to yield great benefits for our environment, our society, and our economy.

The first was the formulation and publication of a new national strategy for research and innovation, Impact 2030. The second was the government decision to amalgamate the Irish Research Council (IRC) and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) to create a new national research funding agency, which is due to be established in early 2024. These two developments, taken together, are an opportunity to transform, simplify, and enhance our national supports for research and innovation, and ensure a flourishing ecosystem.

Impact 2030 takes a long and holistic view of the power of research to secure liveable futures for people and the planet. It sets out a vision where 'research and innovation make a real and positive impact across society, the economy and the environment'. This emphasis is vital. The ultimate objective of our research and scholarship must be the transition to a sustainable way of living with and on our planet, and to being an inclusive, equitable, healthy, peaceful, and democratic society, with space for diverse and plural expressions of human culture. Our scientific and technological questions and solutions, and modes of economic activity, must be informed and guided by these central challenges.

Integrating research

These are the primary concerns of politicians and the general public alike. When given time to reflect and take the long view, such as in the recent public consultation on research, *Creating Our Future*, people place great faith in the capacity of research and its application to address what they see as the grand challenges: the climate and biodiversity crises; digital and technological transformation and the meaning of being human in a digital world; and living and ageing equitably, inclusively, and well. Furthermore, people see the value and necessity of fundamental and curiosity-driven research. They value knowledge as an end in itself; understand that basic research adds to our store of knowledge, talent, expertise, and creativity; and appreciate that the fundamental insights and discoveries of today contribute, unpredictably and unforeseeably, over years or decades, to the innovative applications, technologies, policies, services, ways of being, culture, and art of tomorrow.

It is in this context that the focus in Impact 2030 on research talent, and supporting talent across all career stages, is most welcome. A research funding agency does not simply fund research: it funds people to do research, and creates a supportive environment in which they can thrive. Talent, expertise, and the capacity to create and innovate are the most important outcomes and impacts of research funding.

“Basic research adds to our store of knowledge, talent, expertise, and creativity.”

This is not to diminish the importance of applied research, development, and innovation. Quite the opposite – there is much to be done right now, and enormous capacity in the system is applied to urgent, real-world problems. The point is that fundamental and applied research are interdependent. Our capacity to innovate now is based on decades of investment in basic research and talented people. And conversely, applied, engaged, and enterprise-based research often reveals or directs us to new and important fundamental questions, as well as resolving the immediate problem.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Impact 2030 highlights the importance of building research and innovation capacity in enterprise, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and in the public sector and civil society, and the importance of supporting engaged and partnership research and knowledge exchange.

Impact 2030 also emphasises how research can contribute to ‘a shared island and an innovative Europe’, recognises the importance of the global connectedness of our research activities and community, and commits to an increased investment in research and innovation ‘rising to at least 2.5% of the domestic economy before end 2030’.

Grand challenges

This is an ambitious strategy, one which directs us towards the grand challenges of real consequence to our society and environment. These

grand challenges are complex and multifaceted, and can only be addressed through multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches. However, our capacity to work across disciplines requires first that we have deep strengths, capacity, and expertise *within* disciplines, and then mobilise and work to common purpose, bringing together different ways of thinking, discovering, and creating. This interplay of perspectives is the root of real innovation.

“Fundamental and applied research are interdependent.”

This is the thinking behind the government decision to establish ‘a new national research funder that will drive interdisciplinary research, underpinned by excellence in all disciplines, and that will maximise its impact on grand challenges’. This new agency is to be formed through the amalgamation of IRC and SFI. Each of these two funders has its own particular history, mission, activities, and governance, and each has contributed greatly to the transformation of Irish research over recent decades.

There is a lot to be gained by uniting our efforts in one agency. It will be important in the amalgamation that nothing is lost, that the new agency brings together all that is good in the mission, culture, programmes, and activities of the existing funders, and that the new whole is greater than the sum of its antecedent parts. Given the professionalism and commitment of those involved, there is no doubt that this will be the outcome.

The ‘ecosystem’ analogy is often used to describe our research and innovation system, but only rarely do we reflect on its implications. Key to the resilience of an ecosystem are its diversity, interdependencies at different scales, and adaptability. Ecosystems respond best to interventions that are simple, holistic, sustained, appropriate to context, and supportive of diversity. It is with this in mind that we should seize the opportunity presented by Impact 2030 and the formation of a new national research agency to bring about a sustainable step change in our national capacity for research, innovation, and creativity.

Research and innovation make a real and positive impact across society, the economy, and the environment.



Creating Our Future – A Book of Inspiration

A national conversation on research in Ireland



Ciarán Seoighe
Deputy Director
General, Science
Foundation Ireland

Creating Our Future sought to understand what challenges and opportunities the people of Ireland experience. It created a conversation on how research can play a role in addressing those challenges and seizing those opportunities. Over 18,000 submissions were received, analysed, and synthesised into 16 thematic areas. The response showed that the people of Ireland want their voice to be heard and that they have confidence in the promise and potential of research to transform lives and create sustainable societies.

The Creating Our Future campaign

The value and impact of public investment in research and researchers was brought into stark relief by the Covid-19 pandemic. The public and policymakers looked to science for a way forward and ultimately for the successful development of a vaccine in record time. In the midst of this global pandemic, while we still struggled with how to reopen our society, we built on the public's interest in research by asking them to consider how research could contribute to creating a better future for everyone.

Creating Our Future was a unique public-engagement activity on research, at a scale not previously undertaken in Ireland. The engagement was based on international best practice, on learning from other countries that had opened similar dialogue on research with the public. The Flemish Science Agenda received over 10,500 questions from the public, to be addressed by scientists. Similarly, the Dutch National Research Agenda unified people across the Netherlands to consider what areas of research were important to them.

Here in Ireland, the campaign was championed by An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris. From August to November 2021, the people of Ireland were invited to submit their ideas. The campaign asked the public to send us their ideas based on a flexible, open-ended question: *Tell us your idea for what researchers in Ireland should explore to create a better future.*

What set this exercise apart from other national campaigns was the extent of the inclusive dialogue on research. From Donegal to Kerry, people gathered in town squares, car parks, community centres,

schools, higher education institutions, and companies to discuss how research can play a role in creating a better future for everyone.

This 'national brainstorm' brought those who would not usually participate in discussions on research into the conversation. Marginalised groups and younger people were encouraged to get involved. The conversation was brought to their doors through interactive sessions involving researchers who are passionate about telling the story of their research. All of this activity drove the audience to an online portal that captured all of the submissions.

18,000+ submissions

We had set a target of receiving over 10,500 submissions. Of utmost importance was to ensure we had an inclusive dialogue and widespread engagement from all sectors of society. But we underestimated the level of engagement, and when the portal closed at the end of November 2021, a total 18,062 valid submissions had been received from people of all ages, communities, sectors, and counties.

Creating Our Future was a unique public-engagement activity on research, at a scale not previously undertaken in Ireland.

This achievement was down to the many individuals and groups who supported the campaign, including the governmental and societal representatives on the advisory forum, chaired by Julie Byrne of Nokia Bell Labs. The advisory forum supported and challenged the campaign team to ensure it remained true to the aim of an inclusive and accessible dialogue. This partnership with a diverse group of stakeholders was vital to achieving the level of diversity in our submissions.

When the submission stage closed, we moved to the tasks of reading, categorising, and synthesising the 18,062 submissions. The expert committee, chaired by Professor Linda Hogan of Trinity College Dublin, along with 70 volunteer national and international researchers from across all disciplines, worked in seven multidisciplinary teams to apply their expertise to analysing the findings. All ideas were read. The group took great care to ensure that the voice of the public was honoured and accurately reflected in their deliberations. The *Creating Our Future* Expert Committee Report gives a detailed account of the methodology, including the rationale for the clustering of themes.

Themes and recommendations

After its detailed study and analyses, the expert committee organised the ideas and findings into 16 themes (see Figure 1). Many of the ideas submitted were relevant to more than one theme, reflecting the nature and complexity of the issues we face as a society. The Expert Committee Report is a rich resource for government, policymakers, representative bodies, and researchers, clearly indicating the wide range of people's concerns, interests, and understanding of the role that research can play in

improving our society. It provides expert commentary to contextualise the submissions, calls to action that could address these, and nuggets of ideas from the public.

16 Themes

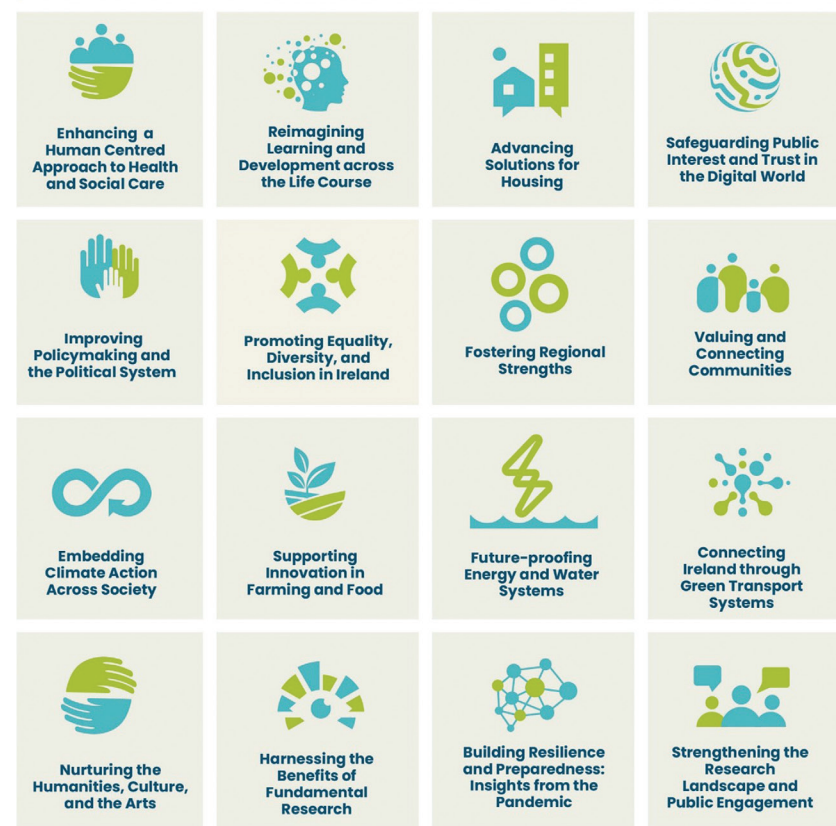


Figure 1: *Creating Our Future*: 16 themes

Arising from their analysis, the Expert Committee Report also set out five recommendations that the public would like researchers to explore to create a better future (see Figure 2).

- 1 Solutions for the future cannot be developed in silos – everything is connected. Researchers should explore ways to live within our planetary boundaries with integrated sustainable solutions.
- 2 Accelerated research efforts are required in mental health and infectious diseases to improve quality of life and strengthen Ireland's resilience in the face of future disruptions.
- 3 Researchers should design, implement, and evaluate bespoke Irish solutions for services and infrastructure (from housing to transport and energy). These efforts should account for our unique geography, society, and heritage so that they benefit all.
- 4 Irish research needs to be at the cutting edge of emerging digital technologies that improve people's lives, increase public trust, and make for a more inclusive and fair society.
- 5 Research is required to harness the power of communities to generate local and systemic change in Ireland (from green initiatives to education and the future of work).

Figure 2: Five recommendations

In July 2022, Minister Harris published the outcomes from *Creating Our Future*. The Expert Committee and Campaign Reports, together with the 18,000+ submissions, have all been published online at www.creatingourfuture.ie.

Next steps

Policymakers, researchers, educators, and students at all levels are encouraged to explore this rich database as a source of new ideas from the minds of the people of Ireland. The 'Book of Inspiration' contains the voice of the public from a unique period; it reflects their desires to improve our society, and their ideas for opportunities to pursue in order to address the challenges we face.

The 'Book of Inspiration' contains the voice of the public from a unique period.

The outputs and recommendations from *Creating Our Future* are integrated into the government's new national research and innovation strategy, *Impact 2030*. They are also aligned with a number of ongoing and upcoming programmes, including the newly established National Challenge Fund, which is funded by the EU's Resilience and Recovery Fund.

We in Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) were entrusted to manage the campaign, and we worked hand in hand with a broad suite of stakeholders, ably assisted by Havas Ireland, whom we contracted to support the programme. The SFI team continues to work with the government and with all of our partners to support the implementation of the recommendations. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that the voice of the public is reflected in their work. I encourage everyone to seek inspiration from the public by reviewing the Expert Committee Report and exploring the ideas in the interrogable database on the *Creating Our Future* website at www.creatingourfuture.ie.

The 'Book of Inspiration' reflects the desires of the public to improve our society, and their ideas for opportunities to pursue in order to address the challenges we face.



New Insights on Irish and European Education from ESRI Research



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Education research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) addresses policy issues that are critical to achieving greater equality of educational outcomes and improving the experience of students, teachers, and others in the education system. This article selects several such studies and other research in the EU and summarises their findings and conclusions.

Introduction

ESRI education research addresses policy issues critical to achieving greater equality of educational outcomes and improving the experience of students, teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders across the education system. The student voice is placed at the centre of the research, providing important insights into student experiences across the school system, their reflections on choices made, and their post-school opportunities and pathways.



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This year has seen a diversity of studies cross-cutting education levels, sectors, and themes, providing insights on new and enduring challenges in education. We have selected some studies which we feel address critical challenges for education policy in Ireland. We also consider some of the rich evidence presented by the European Commission expert group on quality investment in education and training, of which Professor Selina McCoy was an invited member.

Evidence on the Irish education system

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data have continued to provide important insights into educational experiences and gaps between social groups in Ireland, and three areas of research can be highlighted this year. The first focused on early educational development, examining how parents' approach to learning at home and children's exposure to early childhood education and care (ECEC) shapes differences in reading ability. The evidence shows that both children's gender and their family's social class influence their cognitive development between age 3 and 9, though the effects are additive, with little variation in the gender gap across social-class groups. Parental reading, participation in ECEC, and length of primary school exposure were found to

facilitate language development and partly explain differences in reading scores at age 9, although strong direct effects of social class remained, even accounting for vocabulary score at age 3 (McGinnity et al., 2022).

The second theme relates to student participation in grinds. New evidence shows 60% of final year students engaging in such tuition, with wide social differentials in participation – not just in terms of social class, but also as a product of motivation and expectation. In taking a mixed-method approach, the evidence highlights that students acted agentively – reflecting both on the direct role of grinds in a high-stakes exam system and on its disadvantages in terms of the financial burden placed on parents and the inequalities it reproduces. However, some young people lack agency and are propelled towards the grinds culture by parents (parental control) and most likely social norms (class effects, etc.). High achievers and those who display greater tendencies towards conscientiousness seem less influenced by the grinds culture. This new evidence provides a valuable lens on the role and impact of grinds in a high-stakes system. Students highlight how the grinds culture has become normalised, an accepted component of exam success for many students (McCoy & Byrne, 2022).

The third topic focuses on understanding how disability and socioeconomic factors (particularly family resources and school context) shape post-school educational outcomes. The evidence reveals multiple challenges facing disabled young people in Ireland, in particular reflecting the direct and indirect impact of socioeconomic disadvantage at family, school, and community levels. All else being equal, children who are identified with a socio-emotional or behavioural difficulty are less likely to progress to higher education in Ireland. The results also highlight the importance of attendance, engagement, and achievement during primary and early secondary years, and of parental expectations, for later outcomes – raising important implications for inclusive education and policy addressing educational disadvantage.

The evidence shows the disproportionate representation of disabled students in DEIS schools and in economically vulnerable households, and the significance of these factors in students' post-school pathways. The clustering of students with complex needs in DEIS schools emerges as a clear issue. While the DEIS programme has shown strong results in tackling gaps in achievement, attendance, and engagement, adequately supporting the complexity of needs that their students are facing clearly demands more resources, the authors argue (Carroll, Ye, & McCoy, 2022; Carroll, McCoy, & Mihut, 2022).

Using European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey data administered in all EU countries, the study of Currigan et al. (2022) provides unique insights into how unequal educational attainment may translate into deprivation in later stages of life. Using descriptive and regression model analysis of 2005, 2011, and 2019 EU-SILC data, the study finds that educational attainment is a key pathway linking childhood poverty and increased risk of deprivation and income poverty in adulthood

New evidence provides a valuable lens on the role and impact of grinds in a high-stakes system.

in Ireland. Approximately one-third of the association between poverty in childhood and deprivation in adulthood can be explained through educational attainment.

Meanwhile, poverty experienced in childhood is associated with the inequality in educational attainment. The evidence shows that those who experienced bad or very bad financial circumstances in childhood are less likely to progress to third-level education compared to their peers with better financial situations, both in Ireland and in the EU. Although Ireland has one of the lowest levels of inequality among the EU-27 countries with respect to obtaining a tertiary level of education, the gap between those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and those who were most advantaged is still substantial.

The study emphasises that policies seeking to reduce persistent inequalities in educational outcomes, from early childhood through to higher education, are crucial. Among the key policies highlighted are ensuring access to high-quality education at primary and second level, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; providing additional supports for the most disadvantaged schools and children; and ensuring greater equality of access to third-level institutions.

Finally, the comparative study on the education and training systems from primary to third level in Ireland and Northern Ireland offers rich insights into the nature of the two systems (Smyth et al., 2022). The study finds sizable differences in educational attainment between Ireland and Northern Ireland, which persist even when the underlying demographic differences are taken into account. In line with previous research, the study finds pronounced barriers for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who have poorer exam grades at secondary level than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, with wider inequality in exam grades in Ireland. Meanwhile, expectations of going to higher education vary by students' social profiles in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with lower expectations found among those from working-class backgrounds. Ireland has a lower incidence of early school leaving than Northern Ireland, partly explained by the DEIS programme.

Further education is commonly perceived as a 'second-best' option compared to higher education in both jurisdictions. Meanwhile, important differences occur across the two systems in terms of post-school opportunities provided. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland emphasised the challenges of having a multiplicity of providers and duplication of courses, as post-secondary vocational options are offered by many schools and higher education providers, while A-level courses (typically the remit of schools) are offered by many further education colleges. To address the educational attainment gap and facilitate more meaningful progression routes, the authors argue for the need to show the value of taking further education courses, and to ensure improved pathways from secondary to further education and from further to higher education.

Further education is commonly perceived as a 'second-best' option compared to higher education. Further education is commonly perceived as a 'second-best' option compared to higher education.

The study stresses the need for more sustained formal cross-border cooperation between education providers and policymakers. Although stakeholders acknowledge a few examples of good practice in North-South contact and cooperation, such links are ad hoc and rely on individual relationships or specific projects and initiatives.

Evidence across the EU

Investing in high-quality education and training for all is a key priority for the EU, and has been centre stage at the European Commission this year. The Commission established the expert group on quality investment in education and training in May 2021 with the mandate to identify education and training policies that have the strongest potential to boost education outcomes and inclusiveness, while improving efficiency of public spending.

Recruiting effective teachers was identified as a key policy concern for education authorities across Europe.

The 15-member expert group published their final report in November 2022 (European Commission, 2022). It presents detailed analysis on areas that represent the bulk of education and training expenditure and have a major impact on education outcomes: teachers and trainers, digital education, infrastructure and learning environment, and equity and inclusion. These areas are of strategic importance to Europe's green and digital transformation

and to building resilient economies and societies where no one is left behind. The report also covers evidence on the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and strategies to support the integration of newly arrived student migrants.

The report addresses several questions, including:

- Which education and training measures are most effective in EU countries?
- How can the efficiency and effectiveness of spending be improved?
- How can policy decisions be best evaluated?

The group identified many promising education and training practices in EU member states and highlighted areas where knowledge and evidence of quality investment in education could be strengthened. Recruiting effective teachers was identified as a key policy concern for education authorities across Europe. This was highlighted as all the more pressing given that most member states face general teacher shortages, sometimes exacerbated by unbalanced distribution across subjects and geographies, an ageing teaching force, and high attrition and low enrolment in initial teacher education.

The evidence highlights that the decision to become a teacher is influenced by financial rewards as well as expectations about what the work entails in terms of career opportunities or social status. Competitive salaries on par with what is paid to adults with similar education levels working in

comparable occupations enhance school systems' ability to attract and retain teachers. At the same time, teachers' working conditions (including leadership opportunities) are 'highly predictive' of teachers' stated intentions to remain in or leave their schools.

A second key aspect that affects teachers' working conditions is class size. Several studies on the link between class size and student outcomes in the EU reveal a beneficial impact of smaller classes on education outcomes, if teachers can adapt their pedagogical approaches. Therefore, ensuring adequate financial rewards and creating good working conditions for teachers are crucial to having an enthusiastic and dynamic teacher workforce. Alternative routes to full teacher qualifications can be an effective way to attract and retain teachers if underpinned by appropriate support in the form of induction, mentoring, professional development, and career opportunities. Recruitment financial incentives are found to work if well designed and targeted precisely, and if they include requirements to stay in a specific school or area for a certain period of time.

The results of available research on the effectiveness of *digital education* in primary, secondary, and higher education and in adult learning led the experts to draw a number of key policy conclusions. The use of digital technologies for teaching and learning can offer huge opportunities to boost educational outcomes, if properly planned and designed. At the same time, mitigating the risks of digital exclusion or inappropriate use of technology is vital. The impact of digital education on student outcomes mainly depends on which technologies are selected for use, and how they are implemented in the classroom and integrated into teaching. This points to the importance of supporting teachers' pedagogical digital competences.

The group noted that the potential of using digital tools beyond classroom hours has not been fully realised in many countries. They also suggest that it is important to further develop a different paradigm for instructional design and delivery of content for adults, as they have more sophisticated needs and expectations than young learners.

Buildings, classrooms, and equipment are also crucial elements of *learning environments* in schools and universities. The evidence shows that well-built and well-maintained infrastructure can have positive effects on student well-being and learning outcomes. Educational buildings represent 17% of non-residential buildings in the EU and are among the oldest, with 75% constructed before 1980. A large part of the current stock would therefore need to be renovated to be more energy efficient and support the implementation of innovative and blended teaching practices.

Despite the high interest and the need to understand the impact of the physical learning environment and its design on learning outcomes, to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of education spending, robust empirical evidence is still very limited. But the group noted that it is vital to develop common tools or frameworks and to define indicators for assessing the

“ The use of digital technologies for teaching and learning can offer huge opportunities to boost educational outcomes, if properly planned and designed. ”

“ Evidence repeatedly confirms the importance of learning the language of instruction for academic success, and likely for many social and emotional outcomes. ”

current condition and design of new learning spaces and their impact on education outcomes.

Assessing the current state of building stock would allow priorities to be established for the renovation and maintenance of educational facilities. Clear criteria and priorities for allocating construction, operation, and maintenance budgets should be designed at national level to support the quality and longevity of education infrastructure. Multiple use of educational facilities after school operating hours brings important benefits for communities – the school becomes the centre of their neighbourhood, the area is revitalised, and the community is brought together, resulting in improved well-being.

In terms of *equity and inclusion*, the evidence shows that education systems that aim at reducing inequality in students' learning conditions are also the ones that get better academic results and improve students' wellbeing. Given that socio-economic inequalities in cognitive and socio-emotional development emerge early in life, early interventions are key. High-quality ECEC is an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, personal development, and later employability, especially for economically vulnerable families. School segregation is a second critical dimension of education inequality – education systems with more school segregation reduce the opportunities of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Desegregation policies aim at ending the practice of separating pupils among different schools based on their ethnic or social origins, academic performance, or any other attribute of social or educational vulnerability. Tracking and ability grouping also tend to create segregation and may be counterproductive if not well designed.

Priority education policies, like Ireland's DEIS programme, take various forms across Europe. Overall, they have positive effects, even if they require considerable investment. In terms of student-centred compensatory education, one-to-one tuition and peer tutoring programmes are recommended if they are implemented in an individualised way or through small groups, and interventions should be cohesive, coherent, and sustained. Mentorships and summer programmes are appropriate student-based compensatory policies, but special attention should be paid to policy design and implementation.

Finally, in terms of the dramatic increase in the number of newly arrived *migrant students*, evidence repeatedly confirms the importance of learning the language of instruction for academic success, and likely for many social and emotional outcomes. Investments in systematic language-support programmes are therefore essential, and a blend of immersion and separation seems the best approach. The evidence shows that it is fundamental that schools provide sufficient and timely support for children to learn and master the language of instruction, ideally in an inclusive framework. There is evidence that the length of time that children without the language of instruction should spend in preparation classes should

be limited and should include a transition to immersion with support. It should be longer for older children, so they make the transition once they have basic competency.

The need for consistent and responsive professional development supports for teachers meeting the needs of migrant students is also key in ensuring effective educational provision. Teachers should receive effective training to be able to teach the host language as a second language. Parental involvement can bring a host of benefits for students in terms of academic achievement, school attendance, social skills and behaviour, wellbeing, and educational aspirations.

Support to parents of migrant students becomes even more important where parents lack proficiency in the host language, because they are less likely to get actively involved in family-school connections. However, the evidence across countries suggests there are insufficient policy-driven programmes to address the needs of parents of migrant students, to help them support either their children's learning or their children's inclusion (and their own) into the school community. Given the growing diversity in schools across Europe, teacher professional development and school leadership preparation programmes would benefit from engaging with a more dynamic view of culture, creating a space to explore opportunities for both students and schools to adapt their respective cultural practices (European Commission, 2022).

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Taking Action for Climate Change

Teaching about, through, and for climate literacy in schools

Education must be part of how we address the challenges posed by climate change. Climate literacy is an important part of Ireland's climate actions, moving from a marginal issue to a key concern in education policy, curricular developments, and pedagogical approaches. Recent education policies in Ireland promote opportunities for Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship, including climate literacy. Through student agency, climate literacy adopts a pedagogy of hope, whereby fully informed citizens can take informed actions which collectively will make a difference.



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Introduction

Climate change caused by global warming is already transforming life on Earth. It is the defining challenge of our time, the most significant issue facing all citizens today. Evidence of climate change is compelling. With heat waves in the US, wildfires in Europe, floods in Asia, and famine in the Horn of Africa, summer 2022 clearly illustrates the reality of climate change.

In 2015, 193 countries adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of which is climate change (UN General Assembly, 2015). In December 2015, at the Paris Climate Conference – the 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties, otherwise known as COP21 – 195 countries adopted the first-ever universal, global climate deal, officially agreeing to maintain global warming below 2 degrees Celsius. This commitment marks an unprecedented international consensus on the need to transition from fossil fuels within the next few decades. Indeed, the window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all is rapidly closing (IPCC, 2022).

To maintain hope and a sense of agency, climate literacy has to be part of the solution to the challenges posed by a warmer Earth. Situated in the fields of Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship Education, climate literacy is recognised as a core action for addressing climate change. Climate literacy helps students understand and address the impacts of the climate crisis, empowering them with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to act as agents of change.

Current context and policy developments

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the authoritative voice of climate science. Established in 1988 by the

United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation, the IPCC is a partnership between climate scientists and governments. It aims to supply an objective perspective on the current state of knowledge about climate change and its likely impacts.

In October 2018, four years ago, the IPCC reported that the world has 12 years left for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5 degrees. Any increase beyond this will significantly increase the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat, and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. In 2021, the IPCC's sixth assessment report warned that human changes to the climate were becoming irreversible, with potentially catastrophic impacts. Climate action has been further jeopardised by soaring energy prices and the war in Ukraine.

On 25 September 2015, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at the UN. Ireland co-led the negotiations alongside Kenya. The Agenda is a universal plan of action for people, planet, prosperity, and peace. Through 17 integrated SDGs, Agenda 2030 addresses three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social, and environment – to be achieved by 2030.

The SDGs are universal in application and aim to address poverty, hunger and food systems, health, education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, energy, economic growth, decent jobs, industrialisation, inequalities, cities and human settlements, sustainable consumption and production, climate change, oceans, ecosystems, and peace and justice. While all goals address climate change implicitly, SDG 13 explicitly addresses climate change and climate action as an overarching development issue.

In Ireland, there are several national educational strategies and action plans which promote education for sustainability and global citizenship: the 2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development: ESD to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2022), Climate Action Plan 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2021) and Irish Aid's Global Citizenship Education Strategy 2021–2025 (Irish Aid, 2021).

Education is a critical agent in addressing climate change. Without knowledge of the intricacies of the biodiversity crisis, climate science, and the interconnected social justice issues associated with environmental degradation, how can we as citizens deliver innovative solutions to address these complex problems?

SDG 4 aims 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN General Assembly, 2015). Within this goal, Target 4.7 calls for countries to 'ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development'. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) works to equip learners with the relevant knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to create a sustainable and equitable world for all.

Ireland's 2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development: ESD to 2030 contains ambitious actions to further incorporate education for

sustainable development from early years to further and higher education. Its commitments include:

- Developing existing and new frameworks and tools to monitor and evaluate progress on ESD and enhance accountability.
- Promoting and supporting the use of ESD pedagogies among educators.
- Systematic and comprehensive ESD capacity development in pre-service and in-service training and assessment of educators at all levels of the education system.
- Further embedding ESD in curricula and programmes to ensure learners acquire knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to promote and advance and take action for sustainable development.
- Ensuring that ESD competencies are core to learning outcomes.
- Developing leadership for ESD.
- Ensuring access to high-quality resources for ESD.
- Transforming Early Learning and Care settings, schools, and campus environments into places and educational spaces for sustainability.

Teacher education

Global Citizenship Education (GCE) initiatives, including climate literacy, in teacher education in Ireland are currently funded by Irish Aid at the Department of Foreign Affairs. At primary level, Irish Aid supports the Development Education and Intercultural Education (DICE) project, which was established in 2003, and supports the integration of GCE into initial teacher education (ITE) at primary level. All primary teachers educated in Ireland now receive some level of preparation on GCE. In partnership with the Ubuntu Network, Irish Aid supports the delivery of GCE to post-primary student teachers in 11 higher education institutions in Ireland (Irish Aid, 2021).

The Teaching Council, as the professional regulatory body, has statutory responsibility for accrediting ITE programmes and for registering post-primary teachers (Government of Ireland, 2018). Revised standards of accreditation, Céim – Standards for Initial Teacher Education, were published by the Teaching Council in 2020. Céim sets out the requirements that all ITE programmes in Ireland must meet to gain accreditation.

It is also a benchmark for anybody seeking to register as a teacher in Ireland. Under Céim, all ITE programmes shall include the core elements of GCE, which include Education for Sustainable Development, Wellbeing (personal and community), Social Justice, and Interculturalism. This development enhances the opportunities for teacher educators to incorporate climate change education into initial undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes.

To support climate literacy in teacher education, lecturers from Mary Immaculate College are conducting extensive research in theoretical perspectives and pedagogical approaches. This work includes the publication of *Teaching Climate Change in Primary Schools: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Dolan, 2022). This important and timely book

provides an overview of climate change and highlights the importance of climate literacy in primary schools and of cross-curricular pedagogical approaches with a focus on climate justice, providing in-depth assistance for teaching children aged 3–13 years.

Informed by the latest international research, the book helps teachers remain faithful to the science without overwhelming children. Accompanied by online resources, it includes practical ideas and lesson plans that will help teachers to include climate change literacy in their classrooms in a cross-curricular manner. It is written for student teachers and primary teachers and is designed to enhance climate change literacy in teacher education and primary schools. A book for post-primary teachers is currently being compiled.

Curricular developments with opportunities for climate literacy

There have been significant curricular developments in the formal education sector in Ireland, with many opportunities for promoting climate literacy. Recent initiatives include the development of a framework for early years (Aistear), a new Junior Cycle framework, and the start of a review of Senior Cycle education. The Primary Curriculum is currently under review.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework describes learning and development using four interconnected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking. It can be used in a range of settings, including day care, playgroups, naíonraí preschools, and early-years classrooms in primary schools. For young children, climate literacy is about fostering a connection to nature, developing an understanding of how human choices shape our world, and conducting positive environmental actions such as planting seeds and harvesting vegetables.

In primary schools, climate literacy can be taught both within and beyond individual curricular areas. A strand on Environmental Awareness and Care currently features in both the geography and science curricula. For many schools, this is the traditional home for climate literacy. However, integrated teaching and cross-curricular perspectives reflect the multidimensional nature of climate change (Dolan, 2022).

A new programme for the primary education sector, Global Village, funded by Irish Aid, seeks to ensure that primary school children are supported to be active global citizens committed to building a fairer and more sustainable world. Global Village is managed by four partners: Dublin City University, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Irish Primary Principals' Network, and Trócaire.

Education for sustainable development, with a focus on climate, biodiversity, and child agency, will feature prominently in the new primary curriculum. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework includes the competency of active citizenship with the following attributes (NCCA, 2020, p.10):

Developing an understanding and acting on the rights and responsibilities of myself and others.

Experiencing learning through democratic practices.

Recognising injustice and inequality and ways to take action.

Developing capacity to make choices in favour of a sustainable future.

According to the NCCA, 'this competency develops children's capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society at local, national and global levels, and fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately towards the creation of a more sustainable and just world' (ibid., p.8).

In many post-primary schools in Ireland, climate change has become a common discussion point not just in Geography, Science, Politics and Society, and Agricultural Science, but also in Maths, Art, Business, CSPE (Civics, Social and Political Education), Home Economics, SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education), Music, PE (Physical Education), and all the language subjects. Many schools are showcasing excellent research and innovation in climate action, supported by organisations and initiatives such as Worldwide Global Schools, Green Schools, Heritage Ireland, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), Science Foundation Ireland, and Young Scientist of the Year.

As part of the broader redevelopment of Senior Cycle, it is envisaged that a new specification for Leaving Certificate Climate Action and Sustainable Development will be introduced in network schools from September 2024, with a national rollout from September 2025. This commitment represents official recognition of the importance of climate literacy for students, schools, and society.

Many universities and higher education institutions are currently reviewing their provision of courses and structures to address the challenges posed by climate change. Dublin City University, for instance, recently opened its Centre for Climate and Society. Mary Immaculate College has just launched a Master of Education programme in Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship Education (MIC, 2022), designed to equip educators with the pedagogies and theoretical frameworks to consider issues relating to climate, biodiversity, and citizenship.

The programme at MIC is aimed at those working in education, including preschool practitioners, primary and secondary teachers, and those working in non-formal education. It aims to focus on agency through GCE, empowering students of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, and secure societies. It is a blended programme that can be done part-time over two years or full-time in one year, with the on-campus parts taking place in Limerick. It also includes field trips to sites including the Burren, Cloughjordan Ecovillage, and Galway Atlantaquaria.

Conclusion

Transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy must be part of the solution to the challenges posed by climate change. This makes economic, social, and environmental sense. Education has to be part of this agenda. Climate literacy is an important part of Ireland's climate actions, moving from a marginal issue to a key concern in Irish education policy, curricular developments, and pedagogical approaches.

Recent education policies in Ireland promote opportunities for Education for Sustainability and Global Citizenship, including climate literacy. Climate and environmental literacy will ultimately create jobs, generate more informed consumers, and allow citizens to engage meaningfully with their local and national governments to address the climate crisis. Climate literacy recognises student agency, where student voice and student-led learning are core components. Through student agency, climate literacy adopts a pedagogy of hope whereby fully informed citizens can take informed actions which collectively will make a difference.

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Exceptional Ability and the Law

The legal framework for gifted education in Ireland

This article examines the needs of students with exceptional ability in Ireland, and the legal rights and supports available to them.

Introduction

The Irish Constitution promises that all children will receive a 'certain minimum education'.¹ This standard of education is not defined, and it remains unclear whether it is an objective standard or one tailored to a child's ability.

There has been significant judicial consideration of the meaning of the term in cases where parents of children with disabilities have sought to compel the State to provide an appropriate education for their child, but there is a dearth of comments where the learner has exceptional ability.

In *O'Donoghue v Minister for Health*, the Minister argued that a child was ineducable by reason of his disabilities.² O'Hanlon J opined that Article 42 constitutes an obligation to:

provide for free, basic, elementary instruction of all children and that this involves giving each child such advice, instruction and teaching as will enable him or her to make the best possible use of his or her inherent and potential capabilities, physical, mental and moral, however limited those capabilities may be.

O'Hanlon J echoed the opinion of O'Dálaigh J in one of Ireland's most important constitutional cases, *Ryan v Attorney General*,³ that the State's duty to provide for the education of children is broader than the academic basics. He stated that 'education essentially is the teaching and training of a child to make the best possible use of his inherent and potential capacities, physical, mental and moral'. This intimates that greater ability should also be nourished and encouraged.

Differentiation, acceleration, and enrichment

The question remains how such ability should be nourished. Research shows that exceptionally able children may benefit from a number



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of educational approaches, including differentiation, acceleration, and enrichment.

Brennan (2017) describes differentiation as being difference in content, process, or product, depending on the child's readiness, learning profile, or interests. Ireland has no formal differentiation of learning for exceptionally able children in the Irish school system, and differentiation requires much planning by educators, with more support needed for teachers where differentiation is used (Travers et al., 2010). This can be an impossible task for teachers in primary schools, where the average class size is 25 students and one fifth of teachers teach more than 30 students (INTO, 2020).

Acceleration is a term used to describe the practice of grouping learners by ability rather than age (Benbow, 1998). It may take the form of subject acceleration, skipping of a school year, early entry, telescoping (where students complete two years of school in one year), or radical acceleration (skipping a number of school years) (Bailey et al., 2004).

Acceleration is not widely used in Ireland, and the Department of Education does not provide any framework for it. This may be explained by the view that placing a child in a class of older children may be socially or emotionally damaging where a child's emotional development is behind their intellectual development (LaChance, 2016). McGrath (2017) opines that acceleration could be used more widely in Ireland to allow primary children to advance their studies in particular subjects while having the socio-emotional benefits of being with their classmates for other subjects and break times.

Dublin City University (DCU) runs an Early University Entrance programme whereby Transition Year students attend university-level classes for one day per week. Studies show that it has led to more independence in learning and greater coping skills (Ledwith, 2013). This might not be regarded as true acceleration, though, as there are no means for continued study at university level after the students have completed the module.

In order to remain challenged, exceptionally able students must be given access to an appropriate volume of knowledge, the opportunity to exercise self-directed learning, and the chance to learn at a faster pace (Feldhusen & Sokol, 1982). Enrichment is one way to achieve this. Enrichment is defined as providing exploratory and in-depth activities for exceptionally able learners to encourage the development of higher-level thinking skills (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

Enrichment can be achieved in after-school programmes, clubs, and the Centre for Talented Youth (CTYI) in DCU. CTYI provides enrichment classes to primary students in Saturday classes and to secondary students in summer camps. The students are given the opportunity to study non-curricular courses such as neuroscience, IT, zoology, and medicine. The outcomes are overwhelmingly positive for the young people who have attended (Cross, 2016).

Enrichment is defined as providing exploratory and in-depth activities for exceptionally able learners to encourage the development of higher-level thinking skills.

Enrichment is the focus of Transition Year, where schools develop curriculums of work experience, career shadowing, guest speakers, community service, volunteering, project-based learning, competitions, and introduction modules to non-examinable and vocational subjects (NCCA, 2017). This opportunity is of benefit to all students, and school competitions provide opportunities for able students to really excel.

Exceptionally able children are entitled to greater supports in the education system.

While some supports exist and work very well for those who have access, adequate supports are not available on a formal footing and are not available to all. The judicial comments in Ryan and O'Donoghue may bolster a case that exceptionally able children are entitled to greater supports in the education system.

Allocation of resources

Ireland's separation-of-powers doctrine prevents the courts from making a mandatory order directing the executive on how to allocate finances. This was confirmed in an appeal to the Supreme Court of a High Court order which had directed resources to be allocated to provide for the education of a child with a disability.⁴ Keane CJ held that:

I am satisfied that the granting of an order of this nature is inconsistent with the distribution of powers between the legislative, executive and judicial arms of government mandated by the Constitution. It follows that, as a matter of principle, it should not have been granted by the trial judge, however much one may sympathise with his obvious concern and exasperation at the manner in which this problem had been addressed at the legislative and executive level. It is of fundamental importance that each of the organs of government should not only carry out the duties imposed on it by the Constitution but should recognise . . . the boundaries within which they are confined in carrying out their functions.⁵

While the courts may declare a right in respect of the education of particular children, the powers do not stretch to the allocation of resources to enable that right for all children.

Irish legislation takes an interesting approach to gifted children, as does the execution of the legislation. The Education Act 1998, as amended, says that the first function of schools is to 'provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and [to identify and provide for] the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs'.⁶ The 1998 Act defines special educational needs as 'the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students'.⁷ Section 7 says there must be made available 'a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities' of each student.⁸

These legislative provisions at first glance appear to provide hope to parents who wish to ensure their child is supported in their ability. However, no substantial rights are set on in respect of identification of exceptional

ability, additional supports and resources (in particular in cases of dual exceptionality), or differing education frameworks.

Resources are limited in the education sector, and a view prevails that those resources are more fairly allocated to children who cannot achieve the basics without support than to those with exceptional abilities (Cross et al., 2018). It appears that this view has influenced the decision to special educational needs differently in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, which is the legislation that creates the substantive rights. It defines special educational needs as:

a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.⁹

The definition excludes children with exceptional abilities. It fails to recognise that giftedness is neurodiversity requiring additional support.

Outcomes

The National Council for Special Education recognises that exceptionally able children may be insufficiently challenged by the schoolwork provided in a regular classroom, which can cause boredom and frustration at school. It notes that prolonged boredom may lead to disengagement, behavioural issues, and underachievement (NCSE, 2009). Without an appropriate education, some children may never learn the higher-order skills required for mastery of more challenging topics (Adams, 2015). These children may not only fail to achieve their potential but may also underperform compared to their peers.

The Constitution, the Courts, and the legislation recognise that all children should be offered an education to meet their ability and challenge them to meet their potential. The main challenge for parents and educators to support higher-ability children is the lack of substantive rights for these children and consequently finding the necessary resources in an already stretched education system.

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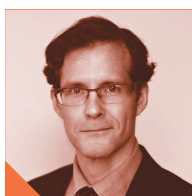
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3. *Ryan v Attorney General* [1965] IR 294.
4. *TD (a minor suing by his mother and next friend M.D.) and others v the Minister for Education, Ireland, The Attorney General and the Eastern Health Board, and by order, The Minister for Health and Children* [2001] 4 IR 259.
5. *TD (a minor suing by his mother and next friend M.D.) and others v the Minister for Education, Ireland, The Attorney General and the Eastern Health Board, and by order, The Minister for Health and Children* [2001] 4 IR 259 at 287.
6. Section 9(a), Education Act 1998, as amended.
7. Section 2, Education Act 1998, as amended.
8. Section 7, Education Act 1998, as amended.
9. Section 1, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004.



Impact 2030: Opportunities, Challenges, and the New Funding Agency



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In this article, Professor Carey provides an assessment of Impact 2030, Ireland's strategy for research and innovation. The establishment of a new competitive funding agency represents an opportunity to confirm key commitments and to address challenges facing the research system.

Launched in May 2022, Impact 2030 constitutes an ambitious statement of direction for Ireland in the domain of research and innovation. As the successor to Innovation 2020 (formulated in a time of economic crisis in 2015), the new Strategy prepared by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, responds to different circumstances and sets out plans across five pillars: the impact of research and innovation on economy, society and the environment; excellence; enterprise; talent; and our commitments to an all-island, EU, and global context.

One of the most significant features of the Strategy is the plan to amalgamate the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland in a new competitive funding agency. How do we get the balance right and make the most of the opportunity? Impact 2030 makes a welcome commitment to parity of esteem, stating the intention to place the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) on an "equal and statutory footing" with STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). This approach is essential, not merely to advance the cause of truly interdisciplinary research (as an aid to addressing grand challenges), but in recognition of the fact that strong interdisciplinary work cannot take place, by definition, without strong disciplines.

Impact 2030 places considerable emphasis on grand challenges, citing climate action and the digital transition specifically. This is part of a wider movement of course, signalled in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in European research policy where Mariana Mazzucato's articulation of mission-based research has been highly influential.¹

At the same time, there is a tendency to treat grand challenges as shorthand, on the assumption that we already know what they are. But before 24 February 2022, to take a notable development, we were not aware that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would become a grand challenge. This example is instructive because it shows that the world

can be set on a different axis suddenly, and we need a range of resources to engage with new realities. In this instance, a knowledge of history stands out as crucial. In other words, our capacity to respond to crisis depends on the vitality of a distributed research base, including the Humanities, which in this case provides critical intellectual leadership.

Covid-19 similarly represented an unanticipated grand challenge. Impact 2030 references the pandemic on numerous occasions, in particular in relation to "virology and vaccine development [which] were vitally complemented by behavioural sciences initiatives" (p. 14). Yet the Covid crisis showed us how imperative it has been to draw on a much wider array of research expertise than these important areas alone, including education, politics, sociology and anthropology (in order to understand such things as vaccine acceptance and resistance, the spread of misinformation and the relative success and failure of different political systems), to name but a few. An all-of-society problem has called upon all of our expertise and research wherewithal. The lesson is not to narrow the basis of our national expertise.

Impact 2030 makes a welcome commitment to parity of esteem, stating the intention to place the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) on an "equal and statutory footing" with STEM disciplines.

Another key question for the new agency is how to balance the priority accorded to basic or fundamental research vs applied or oriented research. SFI's mission has focused largely on the latter, the IRC's largely on the former, with a disparity of budgets between them. Impact 2030 usefully defines R&I as covering "the full spectrum of basic and applied research, experimental development and innovation" (p. 4).

At stake in this is how we support curiosity-driven, individual, PI-led projects, alongside centres in designated areas that aggregate capacity. Nor is applied research confined to industry, but also encompasses civic society and social policy. In any case, we should appreciate the productive relationship between investigator-led research (without boundaries) and applied outcomes. Evidence appears in the fact that of the 42 European Innovation Council grants announced in January 2022 under their "Transition" scheme, 25 derived from ERC-funded, PI-led research.²

The terminology of impact tends to privilege the applied, and on the whole when Impact 2030 seeks to illustrate research achievement it does so in these terms, partly because we naturally reach for the measurable. How, on the other hand, do we measure changing people's lives (through a whole range of research contributions in STEM and AHSS)? The remit of the Strategy also includes innovation, which is typically predicated on an outcomes-oriented approach like commercialisation. But we can afford to take a wider view and to define innovation as breaking new ground and to see it as depending in part on creating a cultural context that encourages conversation, openness and imagination as much as the application of technique.

The dedication of one of the pillars of Impact 2030 to placing “Talent at the Heart of the Research and Innovation Ecosystem” (Pillar 4) is an important statement in itself. The new agency will have a key role in addressing this commitment which radiates through all aspects of research and teaching at third level. The aspiration to attract the best talent to Ireland (p. 42) has implications for the level of financial support provided to researchers. As with all students in the system, the crises in accommodation and cost of living are having a major impact both on recruitment and quality of life. Our system-wide approach to funding has tended to emphasise projects rather than people, with a resulting neglect of career progression and the consequences of embedded precarity. Investment to bring staff/student ratios in touch with international standards will help here. The pledge to improve EDI performance is extremely positive as is the effort to develop career pathways beyond academia. Across the system, we need investment in researchers at all career stages, as the IRC has done in building individual awards from early career stage through to Advanced grants. While early career is key, support for established researchers is equally significant or we risk losing them to other jurisdictions.

The important place of the new Technological Universities in the research landscape forms part of Impact 2030's strategic goals. The stress is on capacity-building and impact in a regional context (p. 27). There are various modalities for achieving progress, with career paths and contracts forming the subject of a commissioned OECD report (September 2022).³ But there is clearly a role for funders too, which is already taking shape in the IRC. An unanswered question remains how ambitious Ireland intends to be. The research mandate for the TUs is very clear in the legislation, as described in the functions section of the TU Act, 2018: s9(1)(f) which stipulates that institutes shall “support a body of research that includes research relevant at regional, national and international levels and pursue excellence in the conduct of that research”. The challenge for the TUs is to balance the requirement to maintain the strong historic access agenda of the IoTs alongside an enhanced research mission and need to expand to international horizons.

Consistent with Impact 2030's declaration of parity of esteem for AHSS and STEM, noted above, the new agency needs to ensure funding support for AHSS disciplines, which are among the highest ranked internationally in many of our institutions. Success in ERC competitions confirms the quality of research taking place in these domains which the IRC has done much to foster. While recognising the value of pursuing grand challenges, we cannot transform AHSS scholars into mere passengers or helpmeets in this campaign.

There is of course much more to Impact 2030 than the new funding agency, including the very significant identification of research for public policy and the role that universities (and funders) can play in a more integrated, responsive system, together with a new model for science/research advice to government. The Royal Irish Academy and IRC collaborated on a series

The important place of the new Technological Universities in the research landscape forms part of Impact 2030's strategic goals.

of webinars in 2021 and on an outline roadmap that proved valuable in identifying opportunities.⁴

But if there is an area an ongoing concern it remains the level of funding. No new influx appears to be planned. The target for 2030 is a modest uplift of 0.29% in GERD (gross [public and private] expenditure on R&D) as a % of GNI* (p. 61). The Strategy says that investment will rise “at least” to this level (p. 3), which holds out some hope. Given that there are notable targets for increasing business expenditure on R&D and private funding (p. 61), it would appear that the burden of the modest overall rise over the eight years of the strategy will not fall on government. Indeed, since GNI* represents 75% of GDP we have arguably faced a decline in investment.

Another side of the story is the reliance on industry which contributes (according to estimates) 1.8% of the overall R&D figure under GNI*. This degree of dependence has knock on effects for the quantum of support available for blue-sky research which is typically the area maintained by government, for understandable reasons. In any event, figures for Ireland's R&D investment (whether by percentage of GDP or GNI*) place us in a lowly position in the EU league table.

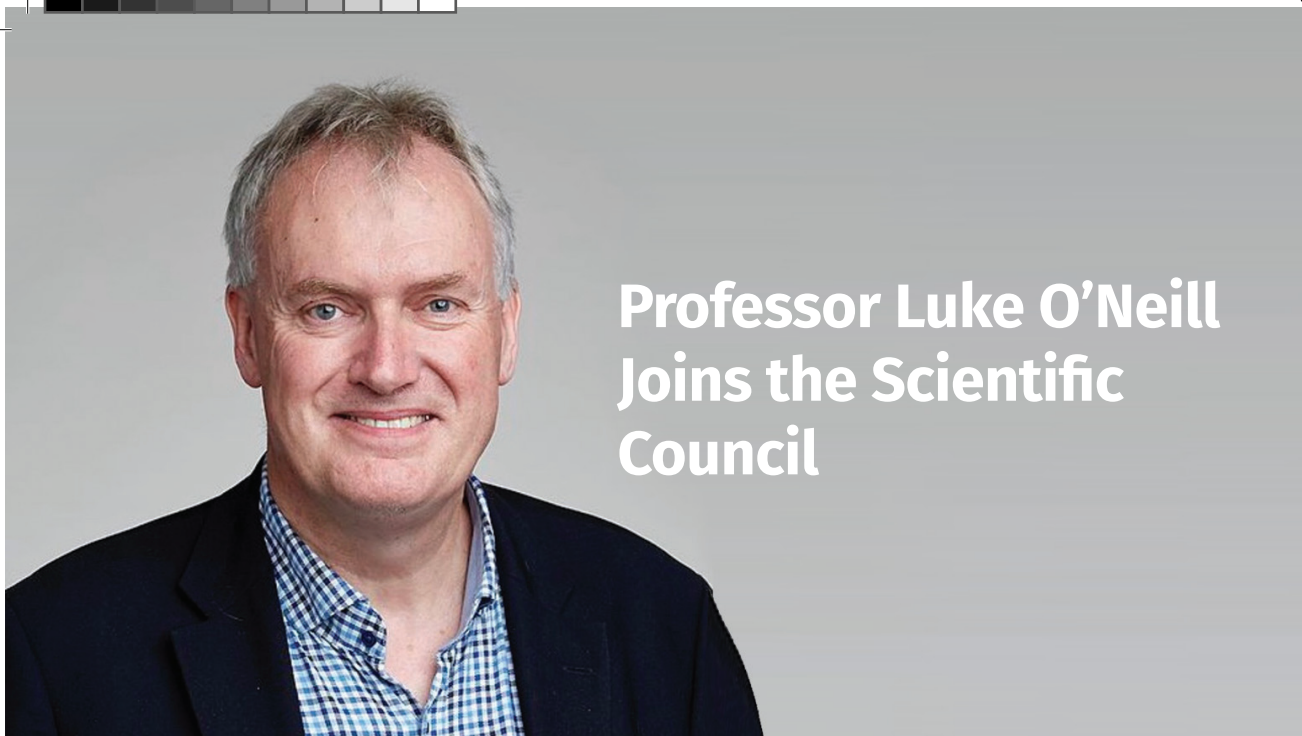
There is widespread recognition, underlined by Impact 2030, of the potential for strategic change to galvanise research in Ireland. The new agency is a key part of the equation. We have a shared obligation to make the case for research, from which the country as a whole will benefit.

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ENDNOTES

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“One of the most significant features of Impact 2030 is the plan to amalgamate the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland in a new competitive funding agency.”



Professor Luke O'Neill Joins the Scientific Council

Professor Luke O'Neill of Trinity College Dublin is among five new researchers recently appointed by the European Commission to the Scientific Council, the governing body of the European Research Council (ERC). He will take up the position on 1 January 2023 for an initial period of four years.

O'Neill is a professor at the School of Biochemistry and Immunology at Trinity's Biomedical Sciences Institute. An expert on immunity and inflammation, he is listed in the top 1% of immunologists in the world by Thomson Reuters/Clarivate and has won many national and international awards for his research.

He has a passion for communicating science to the public, both through his weekly slot on Irish radio and in his popular science books, which include *Keep Calm and Trust the Science: An Extraordinary Year in the Life of an Immunologist*, a diary of the Covid-19 pandemic, and *Never Mind the B#ll*cks, Here's the Science*, which was voted the popular non-fiction book of the year at An Post Irish Book Awards in 2020.

Joining Professor O'Neill on the Scientific Council will be fellow new appointees Harriet Bulkeley, Durham University, Professor of Geography; Thomas Henzinger, Institute of Science and Technology, Austria, Professor of Computer and Communication Sciences; Leszek Kaczmarek, Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology, Warsaw, Professor of Neurobiology; and Björn Ottersten, University of Luxembourg, Professor and Founding Director of Interdisciplinary Centre for Security, Reliability and Trust.

The Scientific Council comprises 22 distinguished researchers. Its main role is to set ERC strategy and select peer-review evaluators. Professor Maria Leptin, president of the Scientific Council since November 2021, said: 'We very much look forward to working with the new members who come from diverse backgrounds in science and scholarship. This breadth is essential, as the ERC's independent governing body represents the entire scientific community in Europe. With these appointments, the quality and continuity of the Scientific Council is upheld.'

The European Research Council was set up by the EU in 2007 and is the premier European funding organisation for excellent frontier research. It funds creative researchers of any nationality and age, to run projects based across Europe. The overall ERC budget from 2021–2027 is over €16 billion, as part of the Horizon Europe programme, under the responsibility of Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

Welcoming the five new members, Mariya Gabriel said: 'The ERC Scientific Council is composed of outstanding European scientists and scholars who oversee Europe's premier frontier research funding organisation. To name just one recent example of its success: three of this year's Nobel Prize laureates have received substantial funding for their research from the European Research Council. I am delighted to give a warm welcome to the five new members who bring to the ERC Scientific Council exceptional scientific expertise, which will complement that of the sitting members.'

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