Education Matters | Yearbook 2015-2016

Shaping Ireland's Education Landscape

Edited by Brian Mooney

Education
Matters
FOOD FOR THOUGHTFUL EDUCATORS

Contents

Introduction To
Education Matters Yearbook 2015-16

By **Brian Mooney**

Editor

Welcome to the 2015–2016 edition of Education Matters Yearbook. This year's edition has added a number of new features to the existing sections which, as you know, deal with each stage of the education journey from pre-school to fourth level. The two new sections explore many of the major themes that are shaping Irish education today. Topics covered include: STEM, internationalisation, leadership in school management, transition from post primary to higher education, junior cycle reform, new learning platforms, the voice of students in education, and many others.

Having worked closely in the past year with all our authors, I am confident you will encounter many interesting and stimulating new ideas in their contributions that will help to shape your own thinking, policy decisions, and actions concerning the major challenges facing Irish education into the future.

There are many people I want to thank for their help and support in making this edition possible and for giving generously of their time and expertise.

First of all, I want to thank sincerely Phyllis Mitchell, the founder and driving force behind Education Matters. Her energy and enthusiasm for the task of bringing this publication to fruition have impressed me hugely.

I also wish to thank the individual members of the advisory board of Education Matters, especially those members who took on the onerous task of approaching prospective writers in their own sectors, and liaising with them over recent months to ensure that all authors delivered their articles on time.

Thank you to each of our authors for giving of your time and expertise in writing all of the content in the 2015–16 Yearbook. You have created a wonderful resource for all those who care about education, and want to constantly improve how we deliver it.

Without our generous and supportive sponsors and advertisers we would not be in a position to produce and distribute this comprehensive overview of Irish education to you our readers. May I thank all of you collectively, and particularly our chief sponsor, Professor Brian MacCraith, President of DCU.

A special thank-you to our graphic designer, Jeroen Bos of Artvaark Design, and the staff at Walsh Colour Print for the wonderful quality of their work.

I also wish to express my appreciation to Teresa, my beloved wife and partner, for her forbearance while I undertook the role of editor of Education Matters Yearbook over the past year.

Finally, I invite you the reader to engage and contribute to the education debate. We welcome feedback at info@educationmatters.ie which we will publish on our website.

Foreword

By **Ms Jan O'Sullivan, T.D.**

Minister for Education and Skills

Each year at this time Education Matters Yearbook challenges us to take stock of what we have done in the last year and to reflect on what we need to do in the future.

We are at a critical time for education in Ireland. The economy is recovering, employment is increasing and tax receipts are ahead of targets. While we cannot afford to take this newfound recovery and stability for granted, those of us with a passionate interest in education can look forward to increased investment over the coming years.

Additional funds

The recent Budget saw important investment in education, with the current education budget increased by €144m. This additional expenditure allowed for important initiatives including a reduction of one point to average primary school class sizes, increased guidance counselling in second-level schools, the provision of 600 additional resource teachers, improvements to school leadership, ring-fenced funding for apprenticeships and some additional support for disadvantaged students at third level.

Budget 2016 was a good start in responding to the needs of the education sector which will benefit from €3.8bn in capital spending up to 2021. However, we will need to go much further over the coming years. As funding becomes more available, it will be ever more difficult to prioritise between competing claims for additional resources.

Reform

There is of course a need for investment in charting a renewed vision for education in Ireland, but money is not the only lever required. We also need a commitment to reform. Over recent years, despite the paucity of available funding, we have led a hugely significant programme of reform through all sectors of education, and the commitment of each of the education partners to delivering that reform has been commendable. This reform will lead to long term change in the education system.

Advances made

We have created greater choice in school patronage, with a 39% increase to the number of multi-denominational schools over the last four years. Literacy and numeracy scores have improved for the first time in a generation, thanks in part to our successful literacy and numeracy strategy. School self-evaluation has been introduced and significant changes made to school inspection. The era of unqualified teachers working in our classrooms is over, and underperformance amongst teachers will be tackled with new fitness to practice hearings. We have brought transparency to the school building programme for the first time, with published five-year construction plans that allow communities to plan their futures with certainly. We have reduced by 50% the amount spent on the inefficient renting of prefabs. We have published and funded a new digital strategy for schools that will transform our approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. And this government has taken several measures to expand and improve the provision of high quality early years education, including the

establishment of a new education-focused inspections of early years and the publication of the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide available at **www.aistearsiolta.ie**.

Initial teacher education has been dramatically overhauled and improved, with the number of teacher training colleges already reduced from 19 to 12. We have created 16 local education and training boards to replace 33 VECs, and created SOLAS to replace the discredited FÁS. Four consortia are now working towards achieving Technological University status, to deliver industry-linked, university level education across the regions. QQI has been created to replace four different accreditation and quality assurance bodies. Regional skills fora are being established, to deepen the links between ETBs, Higher Education institutes and local industry. Regional clusters have been put in place to improve cooperation between HEIs, while we have started to systematically analyse the performance of each University and Institute of Technology.

Clear objectives

These are not individual, disconnected reforms, but all form part of a system-wide programme of change that is designed to meaningfully improve educational outcomes at all levels. Through these reforms, we have four simple objectives: to improve quality and accountability; to support inclusion and diversity; to encourage learning for life; and to build the right systems and infrastructure.

Priorities for the year ahead

The purpose of this yearbook is not simply to reflect on what has happened; it also calls on each contributor to reflect on what can be expected over the coming year. I have four priorities for the coming months, each of which fits to one of the objectives outlined above.

My first priority for completion over the coming months is reform of Junior Cycle – a key measure intended to improve quality and accountability.

There have been very positive developments on this front over recent months. A revised Framework was published, an agreement on resourcing was reached with both teaching unions and other education partners and the TUI membership accepted the revised proposals by a significant margin. The Junior Cycle for Teachers team is now rolling out high quality training for teachers across the country, and students in second year are preparing for their first classroom based assessment. At long last we will have an assessment system that gives recognition to vital 21st century skills such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving. I also believe that giving the classroom teacher a role in assessment will enhance teaching and learning in our schools.

In the Budget an additional €8m was secured in 2016 for the implementation of Junior Cycle reform. Any doubts about my commitment to reform and to provide the resources to make this happen are entirely misplaced.

My second priority, designed to support inclusion and diversity, is enactment of the Admission to Schools Bill. This Bill is designed to ensure that a transparent, fair and accessible admissions policy is adopted by every school. Such legislation is long overdue and will bring coherency to an important area of policy that has at best been *ad hoc* and inadequate to date. The legislation, and the regulations that will flow from it, are not a "top down" remedy. The detail of admissions policy will still be decided by an individual school. However, unwelcome practices such as the charging of fees, the operation of waiting lists extending over years and the 'soft barriers' encountered by many students with disability will be tackled head on.

Welcome as this legislation is, policy in relation to admissions needs to continue to evolve. As our community grows more diverse the denominational primary and post-primary education system seems ever less suited to address the needs of a changing Ireland. Issues regarding school choice and access to religious-run schools are increasingly prominent. These issues are not

directly tackled in the Admission to Schools Bill, but we would be naïve to imagine they will not require a policy response in the very near future.

My third priority, linked to the objective of encouraging learning for life, is the creation of new apprenticeships in Ireland. Next year will see the creation of 25 new apprenticeship programmes – a hugely exciting development. The Apprenticeship Council reviewed more than 80 possible apprenticeship programmes put forward by industry and education partners. 25 of these will now begin next year, and the recent budget provided ring-fenced funding of over €10m to support the growth of existing apprenticeships, and the creation of these new types of apprenticeships.

The reputation of Ireland's current apprentices, who mainly work in the construction sector, is acknowledged worldwide, if less appreciated at home. The apprenticeship model has the capacity to provide high quality training and excellent career prospects for young people. Both Damien English and I have taken a very strong interest in this reform which will see apprenticeships now made available in a range of growing sectors such as hospitality, financial services and insurance.

My fourth priority over the coming months is the enactment of the Technological University Bill – a piece of legislation that is an important part of putting the right systems and infrastructure in place. This Bill, to be published in November, will provide the legislative basis for the creation of Technological Universities, while also improving the governance of our Institutes of Technology.

Four consortia – in Dublin, Munster, the South-East and Connaught-Ulster - have now begun the road towards Technological University status. They are under no illusions that this will be an easy road – to protect our entire higher education system, we must ensure that only institutions operating at a university level can use that title. But with hard work, and with the investment which has now begun to support this work, we can see the creation of four new industry-connected and university-level institutions over the coming years – institutions that will be the drivers of economic and social capital in their regions for many years to come.

In conclusion

These are just some of the important reforms that will advance in the next few months. We will also see new strategies for international education, foreign languages, and science, technology and innovation. A new National Skills Strategy will shape our skills approach for the next five years, while the review of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy will make sure we are not complacent about the need to retain a central focus on reading and maths. I am determined to bring a renewed focus to the divestment of schools, and the accommodation of diversity within our school system. The expert group chaired by Peter Cassells on Future Funding of the High Education will report to me in the coming months, no doubt triggering a significant public debate. A review of PLC provision, to be completed by the end of March, will certainly ask important questions for that sector.

This is a significant body of work to be achieved over the coming months. Throughout that time, however, we will also be facing the conclusion of this Government's mandate, and our collective thoughts must turn to the choices we will face in electing the next government.

Within education, we will face further choices. We have worked to deliver ambitious but achievable reform of the education sector. Some will argue for deeper, faster reform that takes less account of the views of stakeholders. And others still will argue for the retention of much of the status quo.

This debate will rage over the coming months. I commend this Yearbook for creating a space for informative reflection and illumination of the issues that matter in Irish education.

Editorial

By **Brian Mooney**

Editor

In his keynote article in this year's Education Matters Yearbook, Professor Brian Mac Craith perfectly encapsulates the challenge facing Irish education as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding act of our republic. He states that:

> *"As Ireland emerges from an era of austerity, there is a need to ensure that our future plans as a nation are underpinned by a high quality education system. This is a critical determinant in Ireland's social and economic future."*

Only by meeting that challenge can we fulfil the goal declared by Pearse on the steps of the GPO in Easter week 1916 to *"cherish all the children of the nation equally"*. As Liam De Paor points out in his book *On the Easter Proclamation and other declarations* (1997), the term 'children of the nation' as used in the proclamation refers to all the people of Ireland.

In this edition of *Education Matters Yearbook,* we set out to explore thematically how we as a nation, through our decisions on resource allocation, go about creating the highest quality education system possible in Ireland. All international research agrees that the most effective investment in education takes place between the ages of two and five. For that reason we must firstly continue to expand the provision of early childhood education, make sure that those who deliver it are fully trained to the highest levels possible and that they are remunerated accordingly, to ensure that we will retain the best early childhood educators in Ireland.

We welcome the recent commitment by the outgoing government to make provision for the construction of sufficient permanent school buildings to meet our current educational needs. We must put the era of children spending their whole educational life in prefabs behind us.

As outlined by the Minister for Education and Skills Jan O Sullivan in November, last year Ireland had the highest birth rate in the European Union, with 14.4 babies born per 1,000 residents in the State, compared to an EU average of 10.1. Pupil numbers will rise until 2018 for primary school, after which they are forecast to reduce. Secondary school enrolments are also projected to rise until 2025, at which point numbers are set to reach in excess of 400,000 pupils for the first time in the history of the State.

Consequentially hundreds of new school building projects and more than 60,000 additional school places at a cost of over €3 billion will be provided over the next six years to keep pace with Ireland's baby boom, involving 310 major building projects. 156 will be at primary, while 124 will be at second level. The school building plan will provide for 19,000 additional primary school places and 43,000 additional primary school places.

But it is not enough to ensure that children have sufficient classrooms in which to learn, they must also have a curriculum that will meet their personal, educational and vocational needs in a way that maximizes their personal growth and development. As a nation we must continue

the dialogue, which the articles in this yearbook so eloquently expound, concerning the appropriate balance of subjects to which children should have access as they progress through our education system.

For example, should the hours each week dedicated to faith formation in our schools be used for foreign language and STEM subjects, with parishes providing Sunday school classes for children whose parents want them nurtured in their faith tradition? *Education Matters* takes no position on this or other contentious issues, or on any of the other major policy decisions facing Irish education, but encourages and welcomes respectful debate.

We are concerned at the seeming alienation of the majority of second level teachers represented by the ASTI from their trade union negotiations on their behalf. It is a matter of huge concern that over sixty per cent of them ignored the recent ballot paper on junior cycle reform posted to their homes concerning the agreement signed on their behalf last June with the Minister for Education by their elected president and general secretary, and that its terms were rejected by a 55/45 margin by the thirty eight percent who bothered to vote.

Is the fact that fifty per cent of teachers who are under thirty-five years of age are in temporary positions a cause of this alienation? If so, why is this lack of engagement not affecting the TUI and INTO? Ongoing curricular reform is a vital component at all levels of education and it cannot proceed if the teachers in the classrooms throughout the country are not actively engaged, through their representatives, in the discussions and decisions on these curricular issues.

The reductions at all levels of education from 2010 to date, as a result of the austerity imposed on all sectors of education, have cut to the bone and beyond because there was no fat to trim in the first place. Even in an era of virtually full employment before the crash, when the country and exchequer were awash with money, education spending was held at 4.6 percent of GDP. Many countries, including many in northern Europe, consistently spent 7 percent of their GDP on education.

As our unemployment numbers continue to drop, having now fallen below 9 percent, we need to start a national dialogue on the appropriate level of investment to be committed to education at all levels. Unless we do, the aspirations for improving the quality of our education system presented by the authors of all of the articles in this year's edition of *Education Matters Yearbook* will remain just that – aspirations.

Collectively, those of us who find ourselves in positions of leadership within the education community must work to convince both the people of Ireland and those responsible for policy decisions in Government that increasing our investment in education is the surest way of delivering on the promise made by Pearse on that Easter morning one hundred years ago.

Brian Mooney
Editor

Themes

Themes **Contents**

Average is no longer good enough - it's time for a step change in STEM Education in Ireland!

By **Prof Brian McCraith**

President, Dublin City University

Background

The role of Education in determining our shared future in both societal and economic terms was never more important. Our fundamental values, the effectiveness of our innovation ecosystem, our future prosperity, and the cohesiveness of our shared society all depend strongly on the quality of our education system. As Ireland emerges from an era of austerity, there is a need to ensure that our future plans as a nation are underpinned by a high quality education system. This is a critical determinant in Ireland's social and economic future.

Moreover, the Irish public is fully aware of this critical dependence and values education highly. In fact, Irish society prioritises education above all else. This was a clear conclusion of the comprehensive 'Vital Signs' survey (published in Jan 2013) which asked respondents to rank their priorities in terms of impact on their quality of life. Of the almost 120 options presented to respondents, eight of the top 10 items selected related to education and learning, with
>> the quality of the education system
>> literacy levels
>> universities and third-level education
>> and early childhood education
topping the rankings in that order.

In this article, the focus is on a core pillar of our education system, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Education, and, in particular, on the challenges and solutions associated with that topic in Ireland.

STEM Education

In recent years, governments and educational thought-leaders around the world have shown particular interest in STEM Education. This focus is driven primarily by economic and employment considerations. More generally, however, STEM Education is important and merits special attention for the following reasons:

>> From the earliest years, we aim to stimulate curiosity and foster a sense of wonder in our students. Science and Mathematics provide answers to the fundamental questions of nature and enable us to understand the world around us. STEM disciplines of knowledge are the ones by which we understand, measure, design and advance our physical world.

» Expertise in STEM subjects is necessary to drive our economic ambitions and provide the foundations for future prosperity. Knowledge-based economies, such as Ireland's, are particularly dependent on the quality and quantity of STEM graduates.

» Modern democracies require scientifically-literate citizens in order to make well-informed decisions regarding major global issues such as climate change, sustainability, energy, and food security.

With these reasons in mind, and conscious of publicly-voiced concerns from a range of sources regarding the 'quality and quantity of the STEM pipeline' in Ireland, the then Minister for Research and Innovation, Seán Sherlock TD, established a STEM Education Review Group in late 2013 to carry out a comprehensive review of STEM Education in Ireland. I had the privilege of chairing the Review Group (full membership given below[1]) appointed by the Minister to carry out this work. The Review Group completed its work in May 2015 and submitted its report to the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD. At the time of writing, the report has not yet been released publicly. For this reason, this article is written independently of the report, although clearly informed by the process of compiling it. In particular, suggestions made here regarding reform and enhancement of STEM Education in Ireland represent the personal views of the author.

Given the broad, multi-faceted nature of STEM education, and the multiplicity of disciplines involved, it was necessary to establish well-defined Terms of Reference for the STEM Education Review Group. In that context, it was decided to limit the scope of the review to Primary and Post-Primary education. This was a pragmatic decision rather than a conclusion that STEM Education at Third Level does not require improvement!

"STEM disciplines of knowledge are the ones by which we understand, measure, design and advance our physical world."

The Review Group recognized also that a number of important STEM initiatives were already underway or developing in both the formal (e.g. Project Maths; Junior Cycle Reform) and the informal (e.g. CoderDojo; BTYSTE; SciFest) education sectors and that important conclusions could be drawn from these. Bearing all these in mind, the STEM Education Review Group adopted the following Terms of Reference around which it would focus its work:

» The preparation of teachers (at 1st and 2nd Level) for STEM education (so-called Initial Teacher Education)

» The best methods of supporting the current cohort of STEM Teachers within the system, with a particular focus on comprehensive and sustained Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes

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1. Membership of the STEM Education Review Group: Dr. Thérese Dooley, Senior Lecturer in Mathematics Education, St. Patrick's College Drumcondra; Prof. John O'Donoghue, NCE-MSTL, Department of Mathematics & Statistics, UL; Mr. Bill Kearney, Director Dublin Lab, IBM Software Group; Dr. Pádraig O'Murchú, formerly Education & Research Manager, Intel; Dr. Anna Walshe, Education Officer, NCCA; Mr. Seán MacCormaic, Chair of the Irish Maths Teachers Association; Chair: Prof. Brian MacCraith MRIA, President, DCU.]

> » The introduction of new teaching and learning modalities that would enhance STEM education in our schools and for which there was a strong evidence base (e.g. inquiry-based and problem-based learning approaches; new assessment modalities)

> » The use of technology to enhance learning (especially digital and/or on-line approaches)

> » The promotion of STEM careers and the identification of methods to enhance the engagement of students in STEM subjects

One could summarise the 'Terms of Reference' above as reflecting a clear focus on teacher quality (invoking the famous quotation from the McKinsey report: "the quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers"), new pedagogical approaches (including assessment for learning, for example), and the broad issue of awareness of STEM careers and opportunities. In itself, that selection (after significant deliberation) points to some of the key underlying issues that must be addressed in order to enhance STEM education in Ireland significantly and sustainably.

Key Issues and observations on STEM Education in Ireland
In an article of this length, it is not possible to cover all aspects of STEM Education adequately. In this section, a selection of some of the major issues that emerged in our review of STEM Education in Ireland is presented.

I   Informal STEM Education Sector
A particularly impressive aspect of STEM Education in Ireland is the highly active informal STEM education sector. This sector, which operates outside the formal curricular teaching in schools, includes contributions from enterprise (both directly and through their representative associations), learned societies, professional organisations, social enterprises, science centres, and government agencies (especially Science Foundation Ireland). Activities include local school projects, visits, exhibitions, Science festivals, Science week, Maths Week, as well as local, regional, national, and international competitions. A number of these initiatives carry out the important task of stimulating interest in STEM subjects and raising awareness of STEM careers. It is also important to highlight the substantial impact of a number of extra-curricular STEM initiatives that emphasise curiosity-inspired projects, inquiry-based learning and digital skills development. These initiatives include the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition (BTYSTE), SciFest, CoderDojo, and Coolest Projects. Anyone who has witnessed the activity of students involved in these initiatives, and the evident learning and personal development taking place, cannot but be impressed by their power and significance. Allied with this, however, is a concern that the benefits and potential of these initiatives are not fully realised under present conditions. For example, excellent work by students, and the potential for much greater engagement with STEM activities, may be under-leveraged because it is not integrated into the curriculum or assessment instruments. It is well understood that assessment instruments are significant drivers of teaching and learning behaviour.

II   Gender Imbalance

Women are greatly under-represented in the STEM workforce in Ireland. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) estimates that there are approximately 117,800 people working in Ireland in jobs that use STEM skills but fewer than 25% of these workers are women. Apart altogether from issues of equity, this represents gross under-engagement with a talent pool comprising half the country's population.

While recognizing that this problem may have a number of causes, addressing these should be a priority for a country that is so reliant on a knowledge-based economy. One such cause is the selection of subjects and Third Level programmes by young women at secondary school. The 2014 Accenture report (Powering economic growth: Attracting more young women into science and technology), which was based on a survey of 1000 female secondary school students, young women, parents and school-teachers, identifies key barriers operating in the post-primary system as follows:

"Women are greatly under-represented in the STEM workforce in Ireland."

» Negative stereotypes exist that STEM subjects and careers are more suitable for boys.
» Although parents are the main influencers when it comes to advising their daughters on how to define educational and career paths, they lack information about career options.
» There is fragmented information available about STEM careers, making it difficult for students and their parents to evaluate options.
» A disconnect exists between industry's skills needs and students' subject choices for their Leaving Certificate Examinations.

III   Mismatch between employment needs and supply

Ireland does not have a STEM education policy per se. Without an effective strategy for STEM education to secure and sustain a sufficient supply of high-quality scientists, engineers, technologists and mathematicians, there are serious concerns that Ireland might lose economic competitiveness and fail to realise its potential as a nation. For example, according to the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), over the next six years Ireland will be challenged to fill an estimated 44,500 jobs requiring high-level skills in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). A core contributor to this need is the area of Data Analytics, that requires high-level expertise in both Statistical Mathematics and Computer Science. A 2014 HEA report has warned that graduate output may fall behind demand in the economy in the period to 2020. The authors of this report point out that, if current enrolment projections are realised over the period 2014 – 2020, projected graduate output will fall short of labour market needs by 20% in a 'Recovery by 2020' scenario. In this context, it is recognised that the ICT Skills Action Plan (DES/DJEI 2014) makes important recommendations that, if implemented successfully, may reduce the skills shortage significantly.

IV   Teacher Provision

The quality of teaching of STEM subjects in schools has a direct bearing on the quality of learner experience and achievement. Thus, any approach that aims to improve STEM education in our schools must treat STEM teacher education as a key priority. Many factors arise at both Primary and Secondary

> **"Any approach that aims to improve STEM education in our schools must treat STEM teacher education as a key priority."**

Levels both in terms of Initial Teacher Education (preparation of new teachers) and support for teachers already in place (especially the provision of appropriate CPD). In this short article, it is not possible to deal with all of these issues. One such issue is that of 'out-of-field' teachers (teachers who hold no recognised teaching qualification in that subject). The teaching of specific STEM subjects by 'out of field' teachers in Secondary Schools by is clearly not desirable. A significant problem with 'out of field' Maths teachers at Junior Cycle level has been largely corrected by DES-supported initiatives in recent years. Similar initiatives will be required in in Biology, Physics and Chemistry in order to ensure that all STEM teaching in secondary schools is delivered by qualified STEM teachers (as defined by the Teaching Council).

V   Quality

The 2010 McKinsey Report ('How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better') ranks Ireland's school system in the category 'good – great' based on an aggregate score across several indicators of academic performance at primary and post-primary levels. In order to match our ambitions for economic and societal development, our aspiration as a nation should be to be ranked with the high performing nations in the 'great – excellent' category.

The situation is far from reassuring, however, if we consider STEM subjects. Our performance has been consistently average, hovering just above, or below in some instances, according to a series of reports on the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) studies. Ireland's performance in Mathematics has been decidedly average, moving to significantly above average in PISA 2012, and has generally been just above average in Science.

> **"A consistent finding across national and international tests of attainment is that primary and post-primary students find items assessing higher-order thinking skills (e.g. Problem Solving) particularly difficult."**

While some of these trends are welcome, a consistent finding across national and international tests of attainment is that primary and post-primary students find items assessing higher-order thinking skills (e.g. Problem Solving) particularly difficult – this is true for both mathematics and science. Another concern is that there are relatively few of our primary and post-primary students performing at the 'advanced level of proficiency' in mathematics. A number of reports draw attention to low levels of ICT usage by students in Primary Schools in Ireland. National studies highlight that, where ICT is used, it is mainly for low-level activities such as word processing, internet searches and playing computer games. Limited use is made of ICT in the development of higher-order thinking skills, creative or collaborative skills, independent working skills, or communication skills. Successful implementation of the recently-launched Digital Schools Strategy may improve the situation with respect to ICT concerns.

It is also worth noting the frequently-voiced concerns of those lecturing in Mathematics (or in STEM subjects that require reasonable levels of Mathematical competence) at Third Level institutions in Ireland, especially when dealing with First Year students. The increasing reliance by a considerable minority of students on Mathematics Learning Support (MLS) services in order to succeed at Third Level points to a significant mismatch between skills acquired at Second Level and those required to progress further. It is recognized, however, that the Project Maths initiative is an 'experiment in progress' and that it may be too early to draw major conclusions on its success or otherwise.

These overall levels of performance in STEM subjects, however, are not good enough if we aim to provide the best for our nation's children and if we wish to sustain our economic ambitions for the future.

"One over-riding issue stands out: the absence of a STEM Education Strategy for Ireland!"

Conclusions

Our aim as a nation should be to ensure that STEM education in Ireland is of the highest international quality, which it currently is not! Achieving this aim will require commitment, investment and early action, together with partnership across all the primary stakeholders in both the formal and the informal learning sectors. It is clear that the most effective approach will involve a coalition of committed partners across government departments (especially DES) and agencies, the enterprise sector, professional and learned societies, teachers and communities. In particular, the enterprise sector has an important role to play in supporting Government in ensuring the provision of a high-quality graduate output aligned with national economic needs.

Although the issues raised in this brief article may be addressed through a comprehensive set of recommendations, one over-riding issue stands out: the absence of a STEM Education Strategy for Ireland! It is therefore appropriate to finish on that topic and to make one general recommendation:

> An integrated National STEM education Strategy with input from, and relevance to, all stakeholders across the continuum of education in Ireland (primary, secondary and third level) should be produced. This strategy should include a detailed implementation plan with responsibilities and timelines clearly outlined.

This is the major action required if we are to effect a step-change in STEM performance throughout our educational system and if we wish to move our STEM education performance into the highest levels internationally.

Internationalisation: Time to Engage

By **Prof Pól Ó Dochartaigh**
Registrar and Deputy President, NUI Galway,
formerly Professor of German and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Ulster
University

When I spoke to a student who wasn't Dutch during a visit to Groningen last year, I assumed she was on an Erasmus year or a work placement. Turns out she is taking a full degree there, having decided that the international experience would be better for her than staying at home. The language of instruction is English and her classmates are an international bunch. Her first language is German and by the end of her degree she will speak four languages, the other two being Dutch and French. Now there's an employable graduate!

"We are losing out on the international stage because of our inadequate engagement with other languages and cultures."

Our approach in this country to international education is often essentially inward-looking, seeking to capitalise on the fact that, despite our Gaelic heritage, our country and our HE system are effectively English-speaking. That, of course, makes us particularly attractive around the world, and UL Registrar Paul McCutcheon, writing in the *Irish Times* last October, was absolutely right to argue for the "need to develop an Irish education brand in China" that goes beyond the competing efforts of our individual institutions. We should be doing this not only for China but for the world. And we should be doing it now. The seven universities in this jurisdiction all rank highly internationally and all have plenty to offer the international market.

In addition, the European climate could hardly be more favourable to us. The only other English-speaking jurisdiction in Europe, the UK, has a current government that is seen by much of its HE system as hostile to overseas students, and it imposes restrictions on their right to stay and work beyond the formal end of their course, or even till they have finished their thesis, that are positively draconian. On the other hand, the UK has a Higher Education International Unit that offers a coordinated approach to several key areas of international activity. Located within the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, which is also responsible for HE in England, the International Unit "works to support the development and sustainability of the UK higher education sector's influence and competitiveness in a global environment and to represent the sector's distinctive strengths within Europe and internationally." Its four key areas are:

1. Provide market intelligence to identify opportunities;
2. Build capacity of the UK HE sector to capture international opportunities;
3. Represent the UK HE sector internationally;
4. Shape international and European policy.

Of course, the UK has a legacy of global involvement that outstrips Ireland's, for all the soft power that aspects of our culture from James Joyce through Guinness to Riverdance (to name just three) have given us, but there is a coordinated strategic approach in the UK that complements and enhances the activities of individual institutions beyond inward mobility. A few years ago, when I was still at UU, I had the privilege of being involved in a UK HE International Unit working group that sought to increase opportunities for UK students to spend part of their studies on a placement overseas, whether they were studying a language or not. That might also be a fruitful area of activity for Enterprise Ireland, whose efforts are to be commended but also, arguably, to be enhanced. "Education in Ireland" is a useful brand, but almost the entire focus of its 2010–15 strategic plan was attracting people to come to Ireland and institutions to collaborate with Ireland. Outward mobility of students was devolved entirely to the institutions under Strategic Action 9 (of 10). Yet it is precisely that international experience that will increase their attractiveness to employers.

Other European countries, such as Germany, have clear strategies for outward mobility, seeing in it the acquisition of skills among its graduates that will enhance the country's competitiveness. They

"In Ireland we have been neglecting languages for too long, and have been bereft of a strategic approach to language acquisition."

are also capitalising on their engagement with the global language that is English by providing more and more courses through the medium of English, and these courses are attracting global students. But, though the student experience of a course taught in this way can also be largely through English, the cultural experience is not genuinely English-speaking. Outside of the UK, only Ireland can offer that in Europe.

Of course, we are competing not only in Europe. Australia and New Zealand offer an authentically Anglophone experience that is geographically somewhat more convenient to Asia than we are. The USA and Canada, too, attract very large numbers of overseas students every year. Yet Ireland offers something that none of those countries can, namely access to Europe. Our position as a member of the European Union, with laws, trade and educational standards increasingly harmonised, offers an experience of something that is bigger than just Ireland. The importance of the EU for internationalisation cannot be underestimated, not merely because we attract European students, but because we offer an Anglophone gateway to Europe that is committed in the long term.

Yet there is another side to the internationalisation coin. Look at this not merely from the perspective of Higher Education, but in the interests of the country as a whole, and it becomes clear that we are losing out on the international stage because of our inadequate engagement with other languages and cultures. Speaking the languages of others generates oceans of goodwill

and a willingness to engage in far more than just the signing of MoUs. China is a case in point: Nothing pleases the Chinese more than when a non-Chinese turns up in their country speaking Mandarin. Yet such occurrences remain relatively rare. When Europeans engage with China, the interpreters are invariably Chinese, not native English speakers. And the same can be said of a host of other countries. When the English-speaking world engages with other cultures, the common language is far more often than not English.

"We all need to be out there promoting Ireland, and we need to be doing it with as diverse a range of cultural, scientific, educational, business and linguistic skills as we can muster as a nation."

Curiously, monoglot English speakers think this places them at an advantage when, in fact, the opposite is the case. A trained interpreter offers insights into the thinking of the other side in business negotiations, and these insights are best delivered by someone who is trained to spot the insecurities or weaknesses in those from the other culture, a culture that they have learned. Simply speaking English and relying on the other side to translate means missing out on those insights. And even when all the negotiations are carried out in English, cultural nuances and behaviours among those whose first language is not English can be lost, and thus a potential advantage can be lost.

One example: a few years ago a Belfast business consultant advised a Northern Irish company during negotiations in Texas. Language wouldn't normally be a barrier in Texas, but what had seemed to be a fairly straightforward set of issues beforehand dragged out through a whole morning, with little progress being made. The issues were clear from the Irish side, but the Texan boss wasn't getting it, they felt. At some point our business consultant realised that the Texan didn't merely have an Hispanic surname, his first language was actually Spanish. Over lunch she, a graduate of Spanish and French, spoke to him in his native language about the issues. The deal was concluded in thirty minutes afterwards. How many other deals have been lost because those linguistic skills are not as commonplace as they should be among English speakers?

In Ireland we have been neglecting languages for too long, and have been bereft of a strategic approach to language acquisition. There are, in any society, intrinsic benefits to raising youngsters to be aware of and open to the influence of other cultures, including a greater likelihood that more tolerant attitudes will result, but languages also enhance employability. They enable our youngsters to engage and be employed when they graduate in more environs internationally than merely the Anglo-American world.

As it is, this New Ireland of ours is increasingly moving towards a situation in which it will be primarily the children of the New Irish who will possess those international skills. It's time for us all to wake up and smell the coffee. We all need to be out there promoting Ireland, and we need to be doing it with as diverse a range of cultural, scientific, educational, business and linguistic skills as we can muster as a nation.

New Centre for School Leadership: a powerful collaboration

By **Mary Nihill**

Director, Centre for School Leadership

The new Centre for School Leadership is a collaboration between the two professional organisations which represent school leaders – the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) – and the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

Initial staff at the Centre comprises three school leaders: National Director Mary Nihill and Deputy Directors Máire Ni Bhróithe (Post Primary) and Anna Mai Rooney (Primary). The Centre's administrative headquarters is Clare Education Centre, whose Director Pat Hanrahan was himself seconded to Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) for a number of years.

Since her appointment, National Director Mary Nihill has been pondering the challenges facing school leaders at all levels, and the values and principles that will guide the work of the new Centre. She shares her reflections here with readers.

A powerful collaboration

This initiative arose from communications between the DES and the IPPN and the NAPD, and initially the discussions focussed on reviewing the current leadership supports for schools with a view to the development of a more strategic approach to meeting the needs of school leaders.

While there was an acknowledgement that there are some high quality programmes and supports in place, it was recognized that there are deficiencies in the current continuum of supports for school leaders, particularly in relation to (a) newly appointed principals and (b) school leaders who encounter professional difficulties. Current provision is fragmented and, in some cases, there is a need to bridge theory and practice.

"It is important that the centre enables all stakeholders such as management bodies, professional organisations and trustees to work together to carve out a professional space within which school leaders' learning is valued and supported"

The decision to establish a Centre for School Leadership on a partnership basis between IPPN, NAPD and the DES represents a new departure and presents a unique opportunity for the development of a coherent continuum of professional development for school leaders. This model also recognises the essential roles played by the two professional organisations in representing school leaders and promises to be a very worthwhile initiative, combining as

it does the legitimate priorities of the DES with the 'on-the ground knowledge' of the realities of leading schools.

Crucial link between effective leadership and successful learning

The quality of school leadership is a key determinant of school effectiveness and the achievement of good learning outcomes. There is strong evidence from many countries that school leaders need specific training in order to respond to the role and responsibilities that they should fulfil in an effective school system. It is essential that the strategies used to promote and facilitate this professional development of school leaders would focus on developing and strengthening skills related to the improvement of school outcomes for students.

Need for Co-ordination of supports

There is a huge need for the coordination of existing supports for school leaders. Quite frankly, school leaders can be overwhelmed with an array of groups sometimes offering exactly the same support. Hopefully, through a process of genuine collaboration with other providers, the CSL will be able to facilitate a reduction in the level of this duplication while at the same time ensuring that school leaders have a rich programme of support that represents best value for public monies.

Relevance and Quality

Research has highlighted the importance of continuous professional development (CPD) for developing school leaders. However, this CPD must be delivered by those who have 'walked-the-walk' of school leadership. It must also make a difference to the day to day work of the school leader. A one size fits all model will not suffice as it must be differentiated to take into account context and culture, as well as the priorities and the career stage of the school leader.

"All school leaders are entitled to dedicated space and time for professional learning and reflection on same, both at the individual level and collaboratively"

The development of standards for school leadership by the inspectorate will help to provide a guideline for the work of the Centre. In this context, there is a need for providers of CPD for school leaders to engage in ongoing evaluation of provision so as to ensure the highest quality of provision.

Developing a continuum of School Leadership

It is important that the Centre for School Leadership promotes the sharing and dispersal of leadership roles and recognises a continuum of leadership extending from the class teacher to the Principal. There is a danger that a quick fix resolution to the current depletion of middle leadership positions in schools might result in a greater allocation of resources to senior leaders such as Deputy Principals. Welcome as this would be in many schools, it is important that it is not achieved to the exclusion of developing a broader concept of the important leadership roles of all teachers in a school.

It is important also to develop future leaders by reviewing and improving professional development programmes and succession planning.

Valuing Professional Development for School Leaders

All school leaders are entitled to dedicated space and time for professional learning, and reflection on same, both individually and collaboratively. It is important that structures such as sabbaticals or other forms of leave, whereby school leaders engage in research, exchange programmes, or other types of professional learning activities, are facilitated to enable them to grow as reflective practitioners.

It is critical that the Centre for School Leadership enables all stakeholders, such as management bodies, professional organisations and trustees, to work together to carve out a professional space within which school leaders' learning is valued and supported.

Professional learning should be supported by appropriate structures, resources and processes at national, regional and local level. The Centre must also highlight the importance of effective leadership at school governance level, in fostering a culture of professional learning and engagement at all levels of school leadership.

Personal Development is crucial – the role of Mentoring and Coaching

International research, and my own experience in the area of leadership development in the Irish context, convinces me of the crucial and inextricable link between personal and professional development. The centre will need to develop supports for school leaders in a way which recognises the interconnectedness of the two dimensions and the way in which they are mutually beneficial. To that end, I very much welcome the emphasis that the centre's steering committee has placed on both Mentoring and Coaching as leadership development tools.

Mentoring is a well-recognised and accepted strategy for attracting, developing, and sustaining leaders across the education sector and beyond. It helps accelerate learning, reduces isolation, and increases the confidence and skill of newly appointed school leaders. It can also be a powerful learning and growth opportunity for the experienced school leaders who become mentors.

Hopefully, combining the resources of the IPPN and the NAPD (both of which are involved in mentoring programmes for their members) with the resources allocated to the centre will result in the establishment of a very powerful support service for school leaders.

The relevant literature and research suggests that coaching as a professional development tool is very effective in bringing about change. Therefore, it is vital that any project on coaching for school leaders is underpinned by a positive framework which highlights the potential benefits of coaching for *all* principals. Investment in coaching as a professional development tool for ***all principals*** would have a very positive impact on improving the school system. That said, we need to avoid developing a deficit model of coaching which focuses this powerful leadership development tool exclusively on dealing with school leaders who are experiencing professional difficulty or encountering challenging situations.

The Biography of Irish School Leadership

The work of the new Centre will need to develop what may be termed the 'Biography of Irish School Leadership'. In this regard, there is huge potential for commissioning practitioners to undertake research that will contribute to school leadership development initiatives, and inform the development of leadership development programmes, thus ensuring that the Centre remains relevant, accurate and fresh in its approach to programme design and delivery.

All in all, the development of the Centre for School Leadership is a very exciting initiative that has the potential to make a real difference to the quality of learning in all schools.

Mary Nihill, Principal at Calasanctius College Oranmore, Galway, has been appointed National Director of the new Centre for School Leadership (CSL).

	Keyfacts
1	The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) is a collaboration between the two professional organisations which represent school leaders (NAPD, IPPN) and the Department of Education and Skills.
2	The quality of school leadership is a key determinant of school effectiveness and the achievement of good learning outcomes.
3	The CSL should facilitate a process of genuine collaboration with other providers ensuring that the current duplication of leadership provision is reduced, while at the same time ensuring that school leaders have a rich programme of support that represents best value for public monies.
4	It is important that the Centre for School Leadership promotes the sharing and dispersal of leadership roles and recognises a continuum of leadership extending from the class teacher to the Principal.
5	Research has shown that an investment in mentoring and coaching as a professional development tool for all principals has a very positive impact on improving the school system
6	The Centre should encourage development research into school leadership in the Irish context so as to ensure that the centre remains relevant, accurate and fresh in its approach to programme design and delivery.

Gearing up for skills development – a challenge of Junior Cycle Reform

By **Majella Dempsey**

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Introduction

Junior cycle reform is a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* translated to "The more it changes [or the discussion about it at least], the more it's the same thing."

2015 has seen a lot of talk, limited debate, teachers voting, confusion, more talk but there is still not agreement on full implementation. Fixed positions have been adopted and it's not easy –at least at the time of writing – to see the way forward. Perhaps we need to revisit the rationale for Junior Cycle Reform and address some of the pedagogical and assessment issues that have emerged. I think we also need to explore what we mean by 'professional development for teachers'. Indeed, I propose that when it comes to teacher professional development, teacher unions have an important, constructive role to play.

Why we need to change?

Our society has moved from an industrial age to a knowledge age. In order to cope with this, our students need a range of competences to deal with a rapidly changing society. We need to look at what they are learning, how they are learning and at the environments they are learning in. Claxton (2008) asks what's the point of school? He challenges us to rediscover the heart of education and move away from the stress of exams and regurgitation of information and instead encourage students to develop curiosity, ask questions and think for themselves. It would be interesting to hear his comments if he read the ESRI report *Gearing up for the Exam* (Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy, 2007). Indeed, the various reports and books emerging from the ESRI longitudinal study that charted young people's journeys from 1st to 6th year and beyond, tell the story of an over-emphasis on rote learning, while the OECD *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS) found that Irish teachers show the *strongest preference for structuring practices* in teaching across all TALIS countries (Gilleece, Shiel, Perkins and Proctor, 2009, p.78).

> The ability to think critically and creatively, innovate and adapt to change, to work independently and in a team, and to be a reflective learner are prerequisites for life and the workplace of the 21st century (NCCA, 2006, p.1).

This opening statement to the NCCA's senior cycle Key Skills Framework sets the tone for educational developments in Ireland in the last number of years. The NCCA is a representative body with a strong Teacher Union

presence throughout this entire process of development and consultation. Initiatives on the teaching and assessment of 21st century skills originate in the widely-held belief shared by several groups— teachers, students, parents, educational researchers, policy makers, politicians, employers— that the current century will demand a very different set of skills and competences from people in order for them to function effectively at work, as citizens and in their leisure time (Forfás, 2009; OECD, 2009; Hargreaves, 2003). The flow of knowledge in this era, coupled with the intersection between education and market forces, is leading to a commodification of information, leading to global competiveness; the world is now one large global market. This global market is characterised by the exponential pace of change. This has impacted on education, with education being linked to economic competitiveness (Government of Ireland, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Clearly education is not, or should not be, aimed at only economic outcomes. Helping young people identify their strengths, discover their passions and develop the skills to respond creatively to the challenges of living in today's world is a fundamental role of education. What kind of skills do they need for this exciting future? Skills for employment, unemployment, self-employment, participating in collaborative environments, climate change, health epidemics, for technological development, democratic citizenship, we could generate a long list. This concept of 'education for now and for the future' asks a lot of policy makers, schools, teachers and students. It is no easy task to educate for now and for an unknown future. This is especially challenging for teachers, especially those regarded as 'successful' with the existing regime. In hindsight, perhaps this dimension of the proposed change has been underestimated.

"Education should not be aimed at only economic outcomes".

Across the OECD countries, key competence frameworks have been developed and underpin changes to teaching, learning and assessment. While there has been a number of variations of the specific terms and the exact content of the set of competences that are being developed, the move to more student centred learning and school based assessment is evident in almost all countries. Different countries use different terms, such as 'general capabilities' (Australia), 'cross-curricular skills' (Northern Ireland), 'competences' (Singapore), 'cross-curricular competencies' (Québec), and 'capabilities' (Scotland) in their policy documents. A Key Skills Framework was developed for junior cycle in 2012. This framework is closely aligned to the senior cycle framework (NCCA, 2006) and describes the skills of *managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others and managing information and thinking*, and was part of the overall developments proposed for junior cycle education in 2011 (NCCA, 2011). In 2015 the skills of being literate, being numerate and staying well were added (DES, 2015). These skills will be embedded in all subject specifications and are a major focus of the proposed changes, with consequences for teaching – including classroom organisation, pedagogies, resources and, inevitably, for assessment.
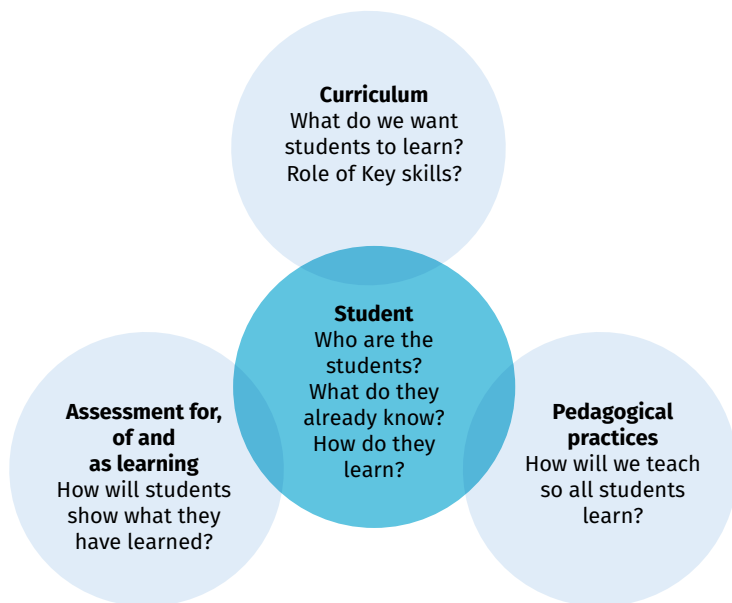
Gleeson (2010, 2012) summarises curriculum debate as a series of oppositions between debates that happen very little, and debates that happen frequently. Those that happen frequently, he suggests, tend to be about how

change is managed, rather than its meaning; about who controls and decides, rather what is decided; and about the relationship between curriculum and economic success, rather than the common good. Evidence for this is replete in curriculum debate around junior cycle, resulting in the neglect of macro-curriculum issues. Key skills is one such macro-curriculum issue that permeates debates about teaching and learning from early childhood education to lifelong learning and links into European policy around competences. If our planning for learning and teaching could shift to use these skills as a focus I believe it would challenge us to create learning environments where all young people could really flourish. There have been many studies on school change that point to the fact that a move away from an emphasis on external assessment has an impact on the quality of the learning environment. More recently we are told that a positive learning environment enhances academic self-image and wellbeing of young people (Smyth, 2015).

The discussion document on the review of Junior Cycle education in Ireland (NCCA, 2010) contended that, in response to global issues, *schools are being asked not simply to teach students about these issues but to shape the next generation of creative problem solvers who can quite literally 'save the world'* (p.6). This document held great hope for the potential for education in junior cycle. The most recent Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) contends that the

> curriculum and assessment arrangements will promote a focus on active and collaborative learning and will enable learners to use and analyse information in new and creative ways, to investigate issues, to explore, to think for themselves, to be creative in solving problems and to apply their learning to new and challenging situations (p.7).

At the heart of this proposed change are the three pillars of teaching, learning and assessment, changing any one will require changes to the other two if we in Ireland want *a quality, inclusive and relevant education for all* (p.6). Figure 1: presents what I believe are the components needed to see real change

Curriculum
What do we want students to learn?
Role of Key skills?

Student
Who are the students?
What do they already know?
How do they learn?

Assessment for, of and as learning
How will students show what they have learned?

Pedagogical practices
How will we teach so all students learn?

to learning environments at junior cycle, keeping the student experience at the heart of the process.

For real change to happen we need an alignment between what students are learning, how they are learning, and how we are assessing them. Each of these plays a crucial role in what kind of a learning environment young people experience at junior cycle. This environment can be one that enables flourishing or one that stunts real learning for our young people. There is not space in this short piece to unpack the many macro curriculum issues in what do we want students to learn. I welcome the inclusion of literacy, numeracy and staying well to the Key Skills Framework as it sends a very clear message to schools and teachers that these are the responsibility of all in the learning environment not just the English, maths and wellbeing teachers. I would like to unpack the need for change to assessment and to teaching and learning at junior cycle and proffer an argument that using the key skills framework as a tool for planning supports such changes.

Why change learning and teaching?

At the heart of all professional development endeavours with schools and teachers must be an enhanced experience for learners. However, the link between teaching and learning is not a straightforward one. What makes a 'good' teacher is very context bound. Teaching affects learning directly; not just by opening up a body of knowledge to the learner, but also by how the teacher scaffolds and models the learning process. Teaching also influences learning in many indirect ways: in attitudes to learning, attitudes to knowledge and motivation and interest in learning. Clearly changing students' practices around learning is as complex as, and may even be more complex than, changing teachers' ways of doing and acting (Cordingley, 2009; Day, 1999).

Recent research has found that while there was a rich capacity for change within the system, teachers and students co-constructed a culture of learning that promoted and valued rote learning. While teachers in many cases embraced change to their practice, students resisted it and looked for notes due to the pressure placed on them with externally assessed exams (Dempsey, forthcoming). To develop skills such as being creative, *managing information and thinking and communicating* requires students to talk about their thinking and to share their learning with others, engaging in dialogue, they need to develop epistemological agency, a belief in their own ability to think and learn.

In the same research, when students when asked how they learn, they were unable to talk about themselves as learners, they invariable talked about writing things out, learning things off. Understanding and application were rarely mentioned (Dempsey, forthcoming). There is some clue in this as to why some students struggle on entering third level where this tactic will not work for the large volume of material they need to learn in any one semester. In my work at third level I see students struggling at making presentations, working cooperatively and being able to critically engage with course materials. Are we happy that young people leave second level education without having developed these skills? We must also be very mindful of the fact that in 2015, 37% of Leaving Certificate students achieved below 300 points, over 20,000 young people. How flourishing were their learning environments?

The Junior Certificate is not a high stakes examination and it is having the same backwash effect on teaching and learning as the Leaving Certificate. It could and should be different.

Why change assessment?
The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) encourages students to understand themselves both as learners and individuals, and students' wellbeing must be supported in conjunction with their intellectual development. Formative assessment needs to be part of the culture of learning in junior cycle where it is understood as the process used by teachers and students to recognise and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning. It requires teachers to process information gathered from students in real time, adjust teaching accordingly, and provide effective feedback for individual students to move their learning forward. We assess our own students at primary level. We assess them at third level with rigor, benefiting from collegial support, internal verification and external moderation.

Recent research in Ireland has noted that students' self image decreases as they make the transition from primary to post primary education and relations with second level teachers has a significant impact on student's self-image (Smyth, 2015). The role of feedback in formative assessment challenges teachers and students to engage in dialogue about learning, students develop meta-cognitive skills and feedback plays a role in determining self-efficacy, motivation for learning and students' ability to take on learning activities (Harlen, 2012). How learning is assessed currently at junior cycle is not fit for purpose and is failing a large number of our young people.

Professional development
Professional learning is socially, culturally and contextually situated (Cordingley, 2009). Our teacher unions should be fighting for a different kind of professional development that looks at ways in which we can exchange knowledge and build knowledge between communities, between individuals, between schools, between schools and universities and all the other supports in the system. Teacher's interest and commitment to their own professional development is evident in the large numbers undertaking postgraduate study, attending conferences and in the growth of communities such as Teechmeets, CoderDojo, and forums such as EdChatIE on Twitter. In particular, many teachers' engagement with Transition Year illustrates impressive levels of professional commitment. As Jeffers (2015, p.27) suggests, *reform at junior and senior cycle needs to build on TY's combination of top down/bottom up initiatives and recognise how trusting schools and teachers enhances capacity.*

There is an appetite and capacity for change in the system. Teachers are involved in very powerful professional development and with the Teaching Council coming into this space, Teacher Unions need to also embrace change and keep teaching and learning a key priority separate from other industrial relations issues. It was indeed a sad day in 2015 when our largest teacher union issued a directive to all its members to refuse to cooperate with class based assessment and not to attend professional development events (see also Dempsey and Jeffers, 2015).

The majority of key stakeholders support the changes proposed. The research here in Ireland with our young people presents convincing evidence for change; individual teachers support the move to a different way of learning and teaching. We need leadership to make this change happen as a key priority as we move into 2016. Handled imaginatively, Junior Cycle reform should lead to serious improvements in learning experiences of the nation's 12 to 15 year olds and, significantly, in the professional development of teachers.

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Transitions reform and the 'points race': What, why and where next?

By **Prof Philip Nolan**

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Introduction

The 'points race' has been seen for many years as a negative and distorting influence on senior cycle teaching and learning, and throughout that time much has been said but very little had been done to analyse, address or ameliorate the complex set of phenomena which together constitute the 'points race'. This changed in 2011, when, following an intervention from the then Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn T.D., the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) co-hosted a conference, *"From Transition to Transaction"* , to discuss the interface between second and third level, and the effect of higher education selection and entry processes, or the 'points system', on learning and the student experience at second level[1].

Since that time a collaborative and sustained attempt has been made, first to understand what are the real problems with the current system, and then to make very specific, well planned and carefully integrated changes to improve outcomes for students. It differs from previous attempts in that the major stakeholders – the HEA, the NCCA, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) – have come together around the table under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). There is a commitment amongst these organisations and their leadership to work together for as long as it takes to bring about real and lasting reform. The importance of the knowledge, understanding and trust which have been built up during this engagement should not be underestimated. There has been real progress in recent years, and cause for optimism that we will make further progress into the future.

This article looks back and looks forward, analysing the complex constellation of problems that is the 'points race', describing the reforms that have been agreed in recent years, and offering some views on what the future might hold.

What's the problem?

One very unhelpful tendency in the discourse on the 'points race' is for each part of the educational continuum to blame the other for the problem. Third-level educators are sharply critical of the curriculum, assessment and standards in second level, while policymakers and practitioners in the secondary education sector point to university admissions processes as the culprit, claiming that the drive to win points for entry to third level colleges is

the major determinant of student learning behaviours and hence teaching practices in the latter years of secondary school.

The truth is much more complicated. It is not simply that we have an issue with how we select students for admission to higher education, nor is it that inadequacies in the Leaving Certificate examination alone account for our difficulties. The real problem is in the *interaction* between assessment processes at second level and the manner in which the third-level system uses Leaving Certificate grades to select students for entry. This interaction creates and reinforces a set of undesirable learning behaviours at second level which persist at third level. The truth is that there are problems at each stage of the transition from secondary to tertiary education, and to make matters worse, the problems at each stage compound and exacerbate the problems at the preceding stage.

"The [Leaving Cert] student can all too rapidly reduce the scope of their learning to match what is likely to appear in the examination, and to begin to prepare standard or formulaic approaches to the likely assessment tasks."

We need to think about this from the perspective of the student as they look towards the Leaving Certificate examination. While there are great positives to a uniform standardised externally-administered State examination to recognise achievement at the end of secondary education, the emphasis on standardisation and externality has unfortunate consequences. It means the Leaving Certificate uses a very narrow range of assessment instruments and tasks, and is dominated by the terminal written examination. In each subject this examination is based on a relatively limited range of types of question and assessment task. This means the student can all too rapidly reduce the scope of their learning to match what is likely to appear on the examination, and to begin to prepare standard or formulaic approaches to the likely assessment tasks.

Furthermore, in order to be fair to all students, these examinations are marked in a highly standardised manner, and in the interests of transparency, the specific detailed responses which the examiners are looking for are published as the marking schemes. A percentage mark is awarded based on the marking scheme. It is from this point onwards that our system becomes truly dysfunctional. These percentage marks are converted into grades, according to a scheme which is unique internationally, in that it has 14 grades (A1, A2, B1, B2, B3 and so on) with most grade bands covering only 5 percentage points. The universities and institutes of technology then award extra points for admission for each improvement in grade. The very narrow grade bands mean that most students are only a few percentage marks away from the next higher grade, and because the higher grade gets extra points there is huge pressure on students to get a few extra marks and thus more points. If every mark matters, and a few extra marks can make the difference between getting into the course you want and not getting in, is it any surprise that many students select subjects which are perceived to be easier, and learn by rote the key points highlighted in the marking scheme, rather than immerse themselves in depth in subjects they really enjoy?

The real problem then is the interplay of a less-than-perfect school leaving examination, a grading system that recognises very small increments in achievement, and a points system for third level entry which rewards these

very fine increments: these elements conspire together to put excess pressure on students and promote rote learning. No one element of the system is entirely at fault, it is the interaction between them that causes the difficulty.

We have also come to realise that the 'points race' is fuelled by the behaviour of third-level institutions themselves. The points scores associated with different courses have captured the imagination of the public and the attention of the media, and unfortunately we find ourselves in thrall to a 'market in points'. Just as we often confuse price with quality, imagining that a more expensive item is somehow better, we have also adopted the mistaken idea that courses that require higher points for entry are somehow better than courses which require lower points. The points requirements have nothing to do with the quality or difficulty of the course, they are a simple product of supply and demand: if the demand for a course is high, and/or the number of places is low, the points for entry will be high. However, the notion that a 'high-points course' must be a better course is so prominent in the minds of students and parents that it has changed the behaviour of students and institutions. The 'points system' is no longer a simple way of allocating places on courses, where demand exceeds supply, to the students with the best Leaving Certificate grade. The 'points scores' for each individual course have become a 'price' or 'value' for the course: 'price' in the sense that it costs you a specific number of points to get in, 'value' in the sense that the higher the number of points, the better the course is thought to be. We now have students working to 'earn' points, and once earned those points are not to be 'wasted': why enter the 'low-points course' that interests you when a 'high-points course', and therefore presumably a better course, beckon.

> "The points requirements have nothing to do with the quality or difficulty of the course, they are a simple product of supply and demand."

The universities and institutes of technology have become drawn into this fallacy. When points for a given course drop, for whatever reason, the institution becomes concerned that this will damage the reputation of the course in the eyes of prospective applicants, that the fall in points will be seen as a fall in the quality or desirability or value of the course, and that students will shy away from the programme, with the consequent reduction in demand further lowering the points and creating a vicious spiral of decline. Higher education institutions began to take measures to raise points scores for programmes where demand was falling.

One common tactic was to take a large course (such as science, engineering, law, business or arts) and break it up into smaller specialised courses, including some popular subject combinations with very small numbers of places. These attractive niche courses attracted very high points scores; of course there remained other elements of the original programme with low points, but the existence of a number of 'high-points courses' created an aura of prestige and quality for the overall subject area and the institution. This led to a proliferation of entry routes, so that over the last 20 years the number of separate entry routes to higher education has more than tripled, and second level students can now choose from over 1200 separate entry routes to higher education, of which 85% admit fewer than 25 students.

This places additional unnecessary pressure on students in different ways. It applies an inflationary pressure, creating the impression that high points are required to get into lots of different courses, and putting students under pressure to achieve higher points scores. It also leaves students wondering whether they would be better off in a 'high-points' specialist course rather than in a 'low-points' general programme. Again, the student is thinking the 'high-points' course must be a better one. But in truth, it is high-points only because it is admitting very few students, and often, once admitted, the students on the specialist course and the students on the general course find themselves side-by-side in the one large lecture theatre for the majority of their first year modules. This trend is forcing students to make choices earlier than they need to; too often the students find they have made the wrong choice, which is bad for the student and bad for the system.

"Often, once admitted, the students on the specialist [high points] course and the students on the general course find themselves side-by-side in the one large lecture theatre."

This, then, is the problem: a less than perfect school-leaving examination, a very granular grading structure, the conversion of these grades to points which are the sole determinant of entry to higher education, and the emergence of a 'market' for points.

What are the agreed reforms?

Given that the set of inter-related phenomena that constitute the 'points race' span the transition from second to third level, it was necessary for the stakeholders to agree an integrated set of reforms. The Minister for Education and Skills has in recent months announced an important set of measures to be implemented for those students entering senior cycle now, in September 2015, and who will apply to enter higher education in September 2017. The measures include:

» An undertaking to continue to address issues with problematic predictability and the assessment of higher order learning and skills in the Leaving Certificate Examination
» A radical reduction in the number of separate entry routes to higher education, moving to broader entry routes
» A new grading scale for the Leaving Certificate Examination with fewer wider grade bands
» A new common points scale for entry to higher education to go with the new grading scale

Problematic predictability in the Leaving Certificate Examination

The State Examination Commission (SEC) has conducted and published a very interesting study[2] on 'problematic predictability' in the Leaving Certificate Examination. The distinction between 'predictability' and 'problematic predictability' is important. It is desirable to have some level of predictability in an examination. Students should be familiar with the overall structure and have some idea what to expect; they should also know in advance the types of assessment task that they may face so that they can properly prepare. Predictability becomes problematic when it promotes undesirable learning behaviours, such as leaving out elements of the

curriculum, or learning by rote prepared answers or formulaic approaches to common problems. The report found that none of the subjects examined were *"very problematically predictable",* though there was some *"problematic predictability".* One very interesting finding was that students who relied on predictions did less well than those who did not.

It has become clear, however, to anyone close to the examinations system, that in recent years the SEC has made moves to address problematic pre-dictability, using subtle changes in question formats and structure to vary the assessment tasks. Students are reporting that it is less easy to predict what will be asked, and that questions are likely to be more 'tricky', that is, subtly different from previous examples of similar questions or problems. The report concluded however that there was scope for improvement of the Leaving Certificate as an assessment for learning

> *"Nonetheless, moving beyond the narrow issue of predictability of question content to the broader issue of the kinds of learning that students engage in, the researchers did identify certain aspects of the examinations that could benefi-cially be addressed. These aspects include further increasing the emphasis on the assessment of higher order thinking skills in the examinations."*

It is to be hoped that the NCCA and SEC will continue to address problem-atic predictability and that, over the next decade, junior cycle reform will be deepened and extended to senior cycle.

Broader entry routes to higher education
The higher education institutions have accepted that the proliferation of separate denominated entry routes to higher education – many admitting very small numbers of students – is unnecessary, causes premature spe-cialisation, has students making poorly informed choices, and is fuelling the 'points race' by inflating points scores. The universities have agreed to radically reduce the number of entry routes, and the institutes of technology are implementing a similar approach. The universities have agreed a set of principles to guide the process, as follows:

> *"The universities will work together to reduce the number of entry routes to the minimum number necessary for efficient and academically appropriate alloca-tion of places to applicants. An entry route is necessary and should be main-tained (or a new entry route established) if:*
>
> » *it is required to admit students to a broad area of study (e.g. arts, science, business, engineering)*
> » *it is generally accepted that a separate entry route is required (e.g. music)*
> » *it is required to admit students to a specific professional programme (e.g. nursing, journalism)*
> » *it is required to ration places where there is a significant excess of demand over supply (e.g. physiotherapy, psychology)*
> » *it is required to admit students to a small number of disciplines or fields of study which are identified and differentiated strategic priorities for the institution in question.*
>
> *Where denominated entry routes are required to ration places on highly spe-cialised streams or pathways within programmes that have restricted capacity,*

universities will give consideration to whether selection to such streams should occur post-entry on the basis of results in first and/or second year examinations.

Universities will, in a collaborative and transparent process, revise their portfolio of entry routes guided by these principles with a view to completing the transition to the new approach at the earliest opportunity consistent with the need to ensure effective delivery of their portfolio of programmes."

New Grades	% Marks
H1/O1	90-100
H2/O2	80-89
H3/O3	70-79
H4/O4	60-69
H5/O5	50-59
H6/O6	40-49
H7/O7	30-39
H8/O8	0-29

Table 1. New LC grading scale, to be introduced in 2017

The universities have already reduced the number of entry routes below 2011 levels, despite large increases in student numbers, and the principles above are to be fully implemented from 2017.

Higher		Ordinary	
New Grades	Points	Grade	Points
H1	100		
H2	88		
H3	77		
H4	66		
H5	56	O1	56
H6	46	O2	46
H7	37	O3	37
H8	0	O4	28
		O5	20
		O6	12
		O7	0
		O8	0

Table 2. Revised Common Points Scale, to be introduced in 2017

New Leaving Certificate Grading Scale

The Department of Education and Skills will introduce a new Leaving Certificate grading scale in 2017. The new scale has 8 grades, the highest grade is a Grade 1, the lowest grade a Grade 8. The highest seven grades 1-7 divide the marks range 100% to 30% into seven equal grade bands 10% wide, with a grade 8 being awarded for percentage marks for 0 to 29.9%. The grades at higher level and ordinary level are distinguished by prefixing the grade with H or O respectively, giving H1-H8 at higher level, and O1-O8 at ordinary level. The core objective here is to reduce the inappropriate pressure that the current very narrow grade bands place on students, the pressure to gain

a few extra percentage marks, jump a grade, and hence get extra points for admission to third level.

New common points scale

The Irish universities, Institutes of Technology and all other colleges which accept applications through the CAO, will introduce a revised Common Points Scale in 2017, as follows:

The revised points scale is required as a result of the new grading system, but the opportunity has been taken to improve the points system. The alignment between higher and ordinary level is fixed based on research and will be reinforced by the standards-setting processes of the SEC.

The new points scale is designed to minimise random selection, by minimising the number of candidates presenting with identical points scores. This is achieved by using a non-linear points scale, which distributes candidates across the full range of possible points scores (0 – 600). The current points scale goes up in fixed steps of 5 points, so that the total points scores are all multiples of 5. This means a large number of students get the same points score, so that for some courses the last students admitted are picked at random from amongst those on the same points level. The new system has uneven increments (100 points for a H1, 88 for a H2, 77 for a H3 and so on). This means that any points score between 0 and 625 is possible, with far fewer students on the same score, and much less random selection. The new scale has been optimised based on extensive mathematical analysis and modelling of the distributions of points scores that would result from different non-linear scales.

The revised points scale will award points for the new H7 grade. This is designed to encourage the uptake of higher level curricula in senior cycle, and to reduce the risk of taking higher level examinations. The current system awards 45 points for a HD3 and none for a HE. A student who considers they might get a HD grade is presented with a considerable risk. If they attempt the higher paper, and do not get the HD, they get no points. If they attempt the ordinary level paper, they might get an OA or OB grade, and even if they don't, and fall to an OC or OD, they get points. This means that these students see the more challenging higher level as too risky, and opt for the safer ground of ordinary level. The new system reduces the risk, and should encourage students to stretch themselves intellectually by taking subjects at higher level. Finally, our research shows that a H7 represents a similar level of academic achievement as an O3, so it is fair and appropriate that they should be awarded the same points, and that is what has been decided, with H7 and O3 both being awarded 37 points in the new system.

Bonus points (25 points) will continue to be awarded in 2017 for higher level mathematics, at grades H6 and above.

The basic matriculation requirements have been revised to use the new grading scale: where a HC3 was required an H5 or better will be required, and where an OD3 was required, an O6 or H7 or better will be required.

What does the future hold?

The reforms described above are significant, and will go a long way to addressing the most important problems with the current system. These changes will simplify the system, reduce inappropriate pressure on students, and reinforce appropriate learning behaviours.

It is dangerous to speculate on what the future may hold, but let me offer some personal views.

There is clearly some 'unfinished business' from the current reforms, not least to ensure that what has been agreed actually happens. Furthermore, matriculation requirements could be simplified and harmonised, and it is necessary to review the HPAT test and determine its future.

There is significant room for further improvement in the nature of the Leaving Certificate examination and in the approach to assessment in senior cycle, so that it becomes assessment for learning more than assessment of learning. The experience of junior cycle reform is instructive. There is, on the one hand, a need to involve teachers as professionals much more centrally in the conceptualisation, design and operationalisation of any reforms. Yet, on the other hand, there is a need to ensure that the changes under way at junior cycle are deepened, and extended into senior cycle, in a manner that improves the outcomes for and experiences of students and teachers. There are ideas that deserve further consideration as to how assessment at senior cycle could be much more challenging, encouraging and assessing higher-order skills. These include interdisciplinary project work, the modularisation of the Leaving Certificate to include more short courses, and the possibility of introducing separate 'problem' papers to assess analytic and problem-solving skills.

"We could consider an extension of the 'bonus points' idea to promote uptake of languages."

It is also worth considering further enhancements of the 'points system'. We could consider an extension of the 'bonus points' idea to promote uptake of languages, or we could consider a 'relevance bonus', awarding a modest number of additional points for subjects relevant to the applicant's preferred course of study.

However, what is most important is that the dialogue between stakeholders, which has made possible the set of reforms already agreed, continues with an open mind and real commitment to change. There is a great deal more we could do to ensure that the transition from second to third level enhances learning and the student experience on either side of that transition. Some of these changes will be difficult. They may take a decade to agree and implement. But they will benefit generations of students. We must keep talking, and keep working.

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1. *"From Transaction to Transition: outcomes of the Conference on the Transition from Second to Third-Level Education in Ireland"* (HEA, NCCA, 2011)
2. *"Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate"* Jo-Anne Baird, Therese N. Hopfenbeck, Jannette Elwood, Daniel Caro and Ayesha Ahmed Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment Report OUCEA/14/1

Looking Over the Horizon: New Learning Platforms, Old Technology Debates

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What is the future of education? What will our schools, colleges and universities look like by the year 2050? Will they survive beyond the digital-era? Can they maintain their traditional status in the face of the Internet and the emergence of new learning platforms, including the growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)? If so, then what types of teachers, curriculum and learning environments will we need for the second half of the 21st Century?

Although you cannot predict the future these are timely questions, especially given the recent launch of a *Digital Strategy for Schools: Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment 2015-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015) and a third level *Roadmap for Enhancement in a Digital World 2015-2017* (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015). There is currently a real effort in Ireland to develop a more cohesive, sustainable and evidenced-based response to the so-called digital revolution. While these two policy initiatives help to plug important gaps in the current Irish digital learning landscape, they tend to focus on the short-term horizon. Similarly this year's first Horizon Report on Irish higher education was limited to a five-year outlook (Johnson, Adams Becker, Cummins, Estrada & Freeman, 2015). The question remains what education systems do we want to develop beyond 2020? How can we harness and shape the potential of new learning platforms and technologies to build the type of education system we want for future generations?

This article begins by looking over the current digital horizon and locating the disruptive potential of new and emerging learning platforms in the bigger picture of societal change.

"New models of learning and teaching mediated by new learning platforms and technologies should be in the service of big ideas rather than being the big idea itself."

It raises important questions about the long-term outcomes we seek from our investment in education and new learning platforms. Secondly we address the reality that today's learners have new ways of learning (i.e. when, where, what and how), which increasingly challenge many traditional methods of teaching. In this section we discuss the changing places and spaces for learning (e.g. physical, virtual, synchronous, asynchronous, in-class, out-of-class) in the context of new platforms and technologies that blur boundaries between formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts. Lastly, we explore some of the recurring debates, moral panics and overhyped claims about the impact of new learning platforms on education. The key point woven throughout the article is that our interest in new models of learning and teaching mediated by new learning platforms

and technologies should be in the service of big ideas rather than being the big idea itself.

Looking over the horizon

Questions about the future of education illustrate the need for bigger-picture thinking with a focus on the longer-term horizon, especially in a world facing such an uncertain future. We cannot avoid an increasingly complex constellation of wicked problems—unsustainable population growth, the challenge of feeding everyone, increasing urbanization and deforestation, deep-seated military conflicts, a growing refugee crisis and gap between rich and poor nations, and the real threat to the future of humanity related to climate change.

Set against these grand challenges our interest in new learning platforms is not trivial work. We have a moral imperative to explore new ways of expanding access to education to enable every human-being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions necessary to shape a sustainable future for themselves, their families, their communities and for humanity at large. This sustainable development imperative provides an important framing perspective for future-focussed discussions about the role of new learning platforms.

However, one of the problems facing today's politicians, policy-makers and educational leaders committed to a transformative agenda of equity, social justice and the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals of widening access to education is the rapid pace of change. How do you plan for the long-term in such rapidly changing times? Although there is no easy answer to this question, it raises the importance of developing agile leaders, adaptive institutional cultures and a set of guiding principles for engaging in scenario planning for alternative futures.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in the history of formal education to bolt new learning technologies onto old ways of doing things, which often shackles the ability to imagine different futures. Rather than develop a new generation of future takers who merely tame the latest technology or next big thing in education, we need more 'future makers' capable of envisioning, reshaping and implementing our preferred education futures. As Toffler (1974, p.3) stated:

> 'All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future. Thus all education, whether so intended or not, is a preparation for the future. Unless we understand the future for which we are preparing we may do tragic damage to those we teach'.

This quote is just as relevant today and underscores the importance of engaging in futures thinking. To borrow from the *Digital Roadmap – Phase 1*, the key question is not 'where are we going?' but rather 'where do we want to go?' (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2014, p. 6). In this respect, The Hunt Report states:

> 'In the decades ahead, higher education will play a central role in making Ireland a country recognised for innovation, competitive enterprise and continuing academic excellence, and an attractive place to live and

work with a high quality of life, cultural vibrancy and inclusive social structures' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.17).

This extract from the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* demonstrates how we can benefit from a fundamental shift away from a preoccupation with education being *in* change, as a result largely of external factors, including the impact of new digital technologies, to a focus on education *for* change. Such a focus moves us away from the language of technological determinism and unavoidably links discussions about the future to broader social imaginaries and our ideas about what constitutes the good society (Morgan, 2013).

The key point is that education has a crucial role in transforming lives and societies. Accordingly, the four 'Pillars of Learning' originally proposed by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors, 1996) offer an enduring framework for thinking about our preferred education futures. In the wider context of the goal of learning for sustainable development the pillars of (i) learning to be, (ii) learning to do (iii) learning to know, and (iv) learning to live together, with the addition of a fifth central pillar of (v) learning to change and transform, provide a valuable set of guiding principles. They help to anchor the emergence of new learning platforms in a deeper vision of producing critical thinkers, critical consumers and critical citizens capable of developing better societies.

New learning platforms

Set against this bigger picture the potential of new learning platforms can be explored through the lens of learning spaces. This perspective is based on the premise that new digital technology expands the range and utility of learning spaces available for learning and that the landscapes within which students might learn have few physical or temporal limitations (Hartnett, Anderson & Brown, 2014). Two aspects of learning spaces shape such an exploration—space and time—and give rise to a number of questions. How are the spaces of formal learning changing? What impact have new virtual spaces had on traditional physical spaces? To what extent are we seeing the development of more flexible learning spaces?

In the early days of educational computing, regardless of type of use or learning approach, computers were largely used inside a classroom. Students worked together in the same space at the same time; they were under the gaze of the teacher. Although computers were large desktop machines, the introduction of a small number of computers required little physical change to learning spaces and the physical and social structural arrangements of classrooms were largely unchanged (Hartnett, Anderson & Brown, 2014). As Cuban (1993) wrote at the time, 'Computers meet classroom: classroom wins'. According to Selwyn (2011) the situation has not changed as the "fundamental elements of contemporary learning and teaching have remained largely untouched by the waves of digital technologies that have been introduced inside and outside of the classroom over the last three decades" (p. 714).

Although there are clear examples of more transformative practice (see Butler, Marshall & Leahy, 2015), the inconvenient truth is that most use of digital technology in formal schooling is still largely framed around the

traditional space of the classroom. This is the case even though hardware and software have changed dramatically in recent years and the equipment available along with potential learning applications has expanded considerably. While the idea of blended learning has emerged (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), especially in the context of higher education where traditional classroom instruction is enhanced through the purposeful use of digital technologies and online learning experiences, this approach can be seen as an extension of efforts to tame technology. For example, in third level institutions the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is often criticised as nothing more than a content repository, which supports traditional banking or transmission models of teaching (Brown, Dehoney & Millichap, 2015).

"Students can now learn on-site at scheduled times, on-site at unscheduled times, off-site at scheduled times and off-site at unscheduled times..."

The key point is: the mere presence of new digital technology does little to support changes to the formal spaces within which students learn. Indeed, in some cases new technologies such as interactive whiteboards confine learning to the classroom and are typically used in ways that fail to open opportunities for new learning spaces. That said, the notion of the modern classroom has both expanded and evolved as the virtual space has increasingly taken its place alongside physical space (Brown, 2005). Importantly, when thinking about when and where learning can occur, students can now learn on-site at scheduled times, on-site at unscheduled times, off-site at scheduled times and off-site at unscheduled times, as depicted in Figure 1 (Hartnett, Anderson & Brown, 2014).
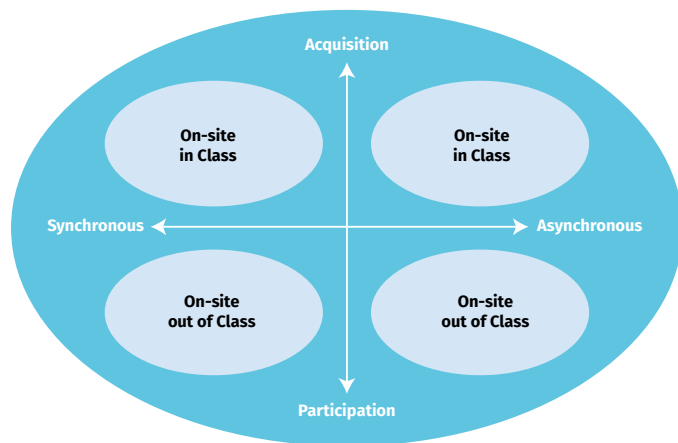
Figure 1: Where and when students learn

The lesson is that digital technologies provide affordances for learning in different types of spaces but the balance between acquisition and participation metaphors of learning (Safard, 1998) depends on teachers' decisions and their actions to either tame or exploit technologies for their purposes. Importantly, teachers' pedagogical decisions and the way students choose to engage in the learning experience can lead to very different outcomes through the same technology. Therefore sweeping generalisations about

the potential of specific technologies for learning are problematic as the benefits depend on the context.

Nevertheless, some new learning platforms and digital technologies have affordances that are so rich and compelling it is hard to ignore their potential. For example, mobile technologies provide the means to open spaces of learning which can amplify the affordances of both physical and virtual learning environments. While the use of laptops by students is increasingly common in schools, colleges and universities, smart devices, and in particular wirelessly connected handhelds such as iPads and other tablets, provide the potential to reconfigure the physical spaces in which people learn (i.e. when, where, what and how learning takes place).

While the second example is fairly commonplace the act of online discussion with people beyond the class creates a larger or different space for continual communication and information exchange. Lankshear and Knoebel (2006, p. 32) argue that space has been "fractured" into two distinct spaces that co-exist for modern learners—physical space and cyberspace. At its most intense, cyberspace provides learners with whole environments in which they can learn, as evidenced by virtual worlds. Of course, these worlds are largely populated for activities outside of formal learning, including online games such as World of Warcraft.

Within our current formal education system, where we still have relatively traditional classes, these two layers of space must be seen to exist side-by-side, especially with so many people now communicating daily online through Facebook or Twitter (Hartnett, Anderson & Brown, 2014). In this respect there has been a fundamental change to the way people interact and learn—for better and worse. Although online interaction outside of formal learning spaces has become the 'new normal', generally speaking teachers are still learning how to harness the potential of these new learning platforms to support better outcomes for students.

The existence of a cyberspace for learning, which now also includes a growing variety of rich media, leads to a layer of information being laid over the traditional patterns of in-class interaction. The challenge is to better understand how these layers can be seamlessly joined together to enhance the student learning experiences. Importantly the possibilities for learning move beyond the idea of online environments merely providing information for use in a physical classroom. Metaphorically speaking when the Internet enters the classroom the potential exists for students to leave it and learn at anytime from anywhere.

"The existence of a cyberspace for learning… leads to a layer of information being laid over the traditional patterns of in-class interaction."

This point raises an important paradox and major policy and funding challenge facing Ireland. Despite recent efforts to develop a more cohesive response to digital learning, the reality is that very few students currently study online from a distance as the traditional funding model for higher education limits the ability of institutions to fully exploit new learning platforms. The question is, will we take steps to open up access to education to more diverse and geographically dispersed life-long learners who choose to

study online because of work and family commitments. If we fail to exploit this opportunity then the traditional conception of the classroom is likely to win again.

The key point is that new learning platforms and digital technologies have created and extended new spaces in which students can undertake individual or collaborative activities. Whether the affordances of the platforms and technologies that create these spaces are taken up to support new models of learning to a greater extent is dependent on the wider policy environment and the beliefs, approaches and expectations of teachers. Put another way, introducing the latest learning platforms within the education system does not automatically lead to expanded levels of student access or the most engaging and enlightened kinds of pedagogy.

Technology Debates
This last point reminds us that a number of recurring debates, moral panics and overhyped claims characterise the history of educational technology. The literature is full of polemical debates that claim technology is either good or bad for learning. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to read the most recent claim in *The Irish Times* from a professor of Business Information Systems that 'books are better than screens' (Gartland, 2015 October 3rd). This type of claim taps deep into our psyche and appeals to traditional values of whether spending hours in front of a screen is good for students' health and long-term development. Such blanket statements and sweeping generalisations are unhelpful as they treat what happens on the screen as a single act or entity. Moreover, they give insufficient attention to the learning context as the computer or mobile device is not a monolithic machine that learners and teachers use in a uniform manner.

In the past similar concerns and moral panics have surfaced with the influence of television and video games. Ironically those people promorting such concerns are often guilty of misrepresenting the evidence and assigning too much attention to the technology itself, which is exactly what they accuse the proponents of the so-called digital revolution of doing. The key point is that the use of new technology in education must be located in wider social practices as a conglomerate of interdependent variables, events, perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviours influence the learning ecology. By analogy 'the music we enjoy is produced by symphonic orchestras, not just single flutes' (Salomon, 1990, p.530).

This point is particularly relevant in light of reaction to the recent OECD (2015) report on *Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection.* In popular media the report was generally interpreted as evidence that the lack of computers in Irish schools may be a blessing (Humphreys, 2015, September 15th). While initial claims failed to critique the PISA methodology supporting the analysis, they also overlooked the conclusion that 'technology can amplify great teaching, but great technology cannot replace poor teaching' (OECD, 2015, p. 17). Once again this statement serves to illustrate the importance of the instructional context in debates about the impact of new learning platforms on education.

However, the OECD report is a timely reminder of the need for teachers and educational leaders to continually question and justify the faith they place

in new learning platforms and technologies. In this sense, attacks on the use of technology in education should not be dismissed out of hand as they offer a valuable source of debate for challenging our assumptions, questioning conventional thinking and fostering critical self-reflection. As Postman (1993) reminds us, 'Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that' (p.5). In the words of Shakespeare, 'The web of our life is a mingled yarn, good and ill together' (All's Well That Ends Well, Act 4, Scene 3; cited in Burbles & Callister, 2000).

In adopting this type of bifocal perspective, it follows that we cannot ignore a long history of broken promises as the use of educational technology is littered with hype, hope and disappointment (Gouseti, 2010). While there are solid meta-analyses which demonstrate the potential of new learning platforms and technologies (see for example, Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamim, & Abrami, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy & Bakia, 2013), the literature is full of hyperbole about how the latest technology will revolutionise education. For example, even before the advent of the MOOC, Peter Drucker (1997; cited in Ehlers & Schneckenberg, 2010) claimed that 'Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won't survive. It's as large a change as when we first got the printed book' (p.1). Similarly, Barber, Donnelly and Rizvi (2013) claim in their infamous "avalanche report" that 'A combination of factors is likely to challenge the 20th-century university paradigm and shake it to the core. Indeed, the avalanche might sweep it away altogether' (p.9).

In largely rejecting the disruption thesis, Bulfin, Pangrazio and Selwyn (2014) show in their analysis of the story of MOOCs how they are portrayed as relatively safe or tame new learning platforms that generally reinforce long-standing status differences between universities. They conclude that despite the radical possibilities of the MOOC movement, the underlying sense is a continuation of the established mores, conventions and hierarchies of higher education (Selwyn, Bulfin & Pangrazio, 2015). That said, while many educators dismiss MOOCs as just another passing fad we might be better served to think of them in terms of Amara's Law:

> "We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run" (Gammack, Hobbs, & Pigott, 2011, p. 368).

In summary, the important thing is that debates triggered by the recent OECD report about the impact of computers in schools, and from emerging research on the role of MOOCs in higher education, returns us to bigger questions about what types of teachers, curriculum and learning environments do we want to create for the future? They also challenge us to think about broader social imaginaries and alternative scenarios and more radical futures in the service of big ideas.

Conclusion

One thing is certain: the future will be different. While our schools, colleges and universities are unlikely to become obsolete by 2050 there is no doubt that new learning platforms have the potential to increasingly challenge traditional models of learning. When used appropriately, in the hands of skilled teachers with access to adequate infrastructure, the latest wave

of new digital technologies can help to open up education, provide learners with a wider range of high quality study resources, promote seamless inter-activity across physical and virtual learning spaces, enable students to learn at anytime from anywhere, enrich the effectiveness of teacher professional learning, and support more efficient and effective education governance, management and administration.

Beyond these benefits there are more fundamental questions to ask about the role of new learning platforms in shaping the future of the education system. To what extent are our future visions for education based upon as-sumptions about the nature of learning, society and humanity that are no longer valid? To what extent can we, as educators, help to shape the future direction of technology in order to enhance life-long learning for sustain-able development and better societies?

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Whose voice, who's listening?
Student voices in research and practice; embedding a culture of listening in education discourse

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Both nationally and internationally, there has been a growing significance in the importance of children's rights especially influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989. The UNCRC challenged the treatment of children and sought to improve this by affirming their need for special consideration, enshrining a number of rights, including, **Article 12** – the right to express their views in matters effecting them and have their opinions given due weight commensurate with age and maturity, which is especially significant to this discussion on student voices in education discourse.

Student voice research is not a new phenomenon and there is substantial evidence from international research that this kind of engagement has the potential to empower students to participate meaningfully and collaboratively in improving their experience of school (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007; Tangen 2009; Robinson and Taylor 2007). Indeed, such consultative practice in schools has been shown to encourage student engagement in learning (Sebba & Robinson 2010) and improve teacher-student relationships (Flynn 2014). In addition, Busher (2012) asserts that the facilitation of student voice is a key component in constructing discourses of respect, empowerment and citizenship in schools.

One prevailing argument for the pursuit of student perspectives recognises their expert role with respect to the knowledge and understanding of what it is to be a student, which is inherent to that role (Leitch et al. 2005; Shevlin & Rose, 2010). However, there is also a body of literature which argues that student

This image was designed in a collaborative enterprise by students with their teacher at one of the nine participating schools in the Learner Voice Research Study to represent their experience and perception of the empowering and transformational impact of student voice engagement. With grateful thanks to Darren McPhail, Sarah Dempsey and Darren Byrne.

voice work should go far beyond ascertaining perspectives from young people and move towards a more democratic process of shared curricular development and co-construction as well as a collective responsibility for developing solutions in education environments (Bovill et al. 2011; Fielding 2015). Shirley (2015) points out that,

> ...it is not simply greater voice that may be needed in educational change today, but rather greater skills in listening to our students and attending to our colleagues. The ability to open one's mind and heart to diverse perspectives, including those that could challenge one's own expertise and status, appears to be badly needed in the uncertain profession that is education (2015, p. 127).

My research since 2008 has focussed particularly on student perspectives of their experience of school, and has included studies to determine participants' insights on supports or obstacles to their learning and enjoyment of school, through to eliciting ideas on developing a sustainable culture of listening and response to student voices in their education settings. A study which I conducted between 2008 and 2012 in six mainstream schools at primary and post-primary level with young people who had been identified with emotional and behavioural difficulties, affirmed the importance of student-teacher relationships and students' sense of belonging and attachment to school as significant to their wellbeing and sense of comfort, all of which was positively impacted through student voice work and the experience of 'authentic listening' (Flynn 2013 and 2014). This study also provided evidence that meaningful opportunities for students to be heard in schools improves self-confidence, encourages leadership potential and involvement in school activities while challenging classroom power relations to a model more closely described as 'power-sharing' and a shared responsibility for learning and indeed behaviour. The findings of this study suggested that a student voice approach to supporting young people is fundamental to the development of an inclusive learning environment for the benefit of *all* students. An education system which promotes inclusive principles should encourage a 'culture of listening'. Schools need to hear, not just the articulate voice but indeed the expert voice of every student in their own school in the pursuit of inclusive education (Flynn 2013).

"An education system which promotes inclusive principles should encourage a 'culture of listening'. Schools need to hear, not just the articulate voice, but indeed the expert voice of every student in their own school in the pursuit of inclusive education."

To pursue these aspirations, I was fortunate enough to have the support of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) and in the school year 2013/14, began 'The Learner Voice Research Study' which involved a volunteer group of students in 3 participating post-primary level schools identifying an issue which they believed could be addressed through listening to student voices and opinions. The students worked with co-operating teachers during that year to meet their objectives which ranged from: improving teacher-student relationships; developing and prioritising 'trust' in behaviour; to, determining how students perceive and experience 'inclusion' in school. The reported success and enjoyment of this process was responsible for an expansion of this collaborative research relationship with NAPD to include the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

(NCCA) and refinement of the research goals in order to: determine how to include student voice in planning such that there is an embedded culture of listening, and a strategy that will provide a sustainable structure and response to student voice in education discourse for the NCCA and participating schools'.

Since September 2014, I have been working closely with NCCA and participant schools from around the country so that we can listen to volunteer groups of students who have shared insights with us on such topics as student voice activity, curricular design, the language of learning, and aspirations about creating or improving the culture of listening in schools. Since the beginning of this process the number of participating schools has increased from four to nine and includes:

Number	Type of School
3	Voluntary Secondary Schools
3	Community Colleges
2	Community Schools
1	Comprehensive School
1	Special School

In May 2015, the research collaboration held a one day research symposium in Trinity College Dublin which included representations and/or representatives from the nine schools. Principals, teachers and students attended the symposium and in round-table groups discussed and reached consensus on a series of questions, which attempted to ascertain information such as, why student voice is important; what areas of school life it could support or contribute to; how it could be set up from scratch; how it could be kept going once started; and what the best learning environment in school would look, sound and feel like.

Feedback prioritised the importance of building student voice into as many school activities as possible and ensuring feedback to students so that they are aware of changes they have influenced. There was significant discussion around the importance of student-teacher relationships and how their quality impacts on the experience of school for students. Feeling valued, and linking this to being heard was a predominant theme in the discussions across the day, in addition to self-esteem, self-worth, the desire to be taken seriously and assurances that 'it's ok to be wrong, to make mistakes'. Student councils were generally criticised with a call for something more representative of student voice to replace them. Feedback also indicated some surprise on the part of participants at how students can have very different experiences from school to school in terms of having someone to talk to or having the opportunity to express opinions.

A selection of comments on the experience of being involved in this student voice engagement over the school year 2014/2015 include the following:

This is such a privilege; I feel so lucky to be a part of this; I know we've been heard; It's important that the Department of Education listens to young people

because we know what it's like to study in school now; It's good to be able to get your point across, because it's annoying like if you have strong opinions about a subject and no one's listening to ya; Great to hear the view of other students – to realise that people had very similar opinions and experiences even though they were at different stages and different ages; The (idea of the) Student Voice School is a brilliant idea; Student Council is 'over'; Nothing about us without us[1]...this makes me feel valued; This was a great opportunity and I feel honoured to have been involved; Everyone has the right to be heard; Today (the day of the student voice symposium) and the opportunity to chat and share ideas is in essence what student and teacher voice should be about

Year two of this study with the NCCA and with the support of NAPD will see the establishment of the NCCA National Student Voice Forum which meets for the first time on 22nd October 2015 and again on 15th March 2016. The objectives of these forums is to pursue responses to the question of how to embed a sustainable structure and response to student voice in education discourse and to model this practice on the part of NCCA by discussing important issues for students such as wellbeing and attachment in schools. Guidelines and suggested questions were sent to schools in September on setting up student voice workshops both as preparation for the first forum and an opportunity to strengthen and promote further opportunities for student voice activity in each participating school.

Data collected from the first year of this study with NCCA (2014/15) reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard (Flynn 2013; Simmon et al. 2015).

"Data collected from the first year of this study with NCCA (2014/15) reflect national and international literature on the links between 'having a say' and wellbeing, identified most particularly in comments which link the sense of 'feeling valued' with being heard."

The importance of positive relationships between students and teachers was also highlighted as particularly significant during the research symposium in May of this year (Smyth 2015). Opportunities for students and teachers to share ideas and discover commonalities in aspirations and goals for learning, and the experience of the day-to-day school environment, provided tangible evidence of potential benefits in shared opportunities for communication, listening and being heard. These benefits were acknowledged by students *and* adults as part of this experience and resonate with Fielding's (2015) argument for:

...an increasing reciprocity between generations... [because].. evidence from cutting edge, successful innovation in schools in the last decade points to its powerful, immensely positive educative potential for adults and young people alike...[which calls for]...structured inter-generational dialogue promoting active listening, recognition of shared concerns and collective responsibility for developing solutions (Fielding, 2015, p. 26).

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1. This slogan was used for a learner voice conference in June 2015, Trinity College Dublin, for which student participants in the NCCA collaborative student voice study designed an iconic image to represent student voice. The image and slogan was presented to the participants at the symposium in advance of the conference

Student voice engagement of this kind is not without its challenges. It is impossible to ascertain a representative 'student voice', just as consultation across any age or cultural group cannot generate a homogenous 'voice', the same is true when consulting and involving young people in decision making. The inclusion of student perspectives is an important development in education discourse, however, student 'voice' must also reflect dissenting views and the fact that just as in any other group of stakeholders, experience impacts on opinions and not everyone has the same point of view. My research to date has demonstrated that although students want to be heard, it is often easier to provide these opportunities when meeting with young people as an outsider to a school, whether at primary or post primary level.

All of the work I have done is this area since 2008 has involved small samples, usually because of the time commitment involved in regular consultations and travelling to represent schools in different parts of the country. However, with the increase in numbers in this most recent NCCA collaborative student voice study from four to nine participant schools within one year, I am confident that we will gradually include more schools involved in student voice consultation and planning across the remainder of the study and into the future, especially with the establishment of the NCCA student voice forum. Schools are of course, busy places but the challenge at the heart of this project is both to determine *how* and support *what* changes need to occur, in order that schools have a sustainable structure to embed a culture of listening and avoid the necessity for outsiders to the school facilitating the process. It is my ambition that we may realise aspirations as expressed by one young participant, 'student voice should just be what we do here'!

In June 2015, I hosted an international learner voice conference entitled *'Nothing about us without us'; listening to the voices of our students* which included presentations from students at primary, secondary and tertiary level as well as teachers, parents, policy makers, researchers and academics. The enthusiasm shared across that two day event left me in no doubt of the appetite there is now to consolidate and build upon what we know from national and international research and practice on the benefits for our young people and our education system when we listen to student insights and learn from them and their expertise on what it is to be a student and a learner in their moment of that experience.

The opportunities are presenting themselves to involve young people with all education stakeholders; teachers, parents and policy makers, in education discourse and the development of the democratic school.

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Inclusion: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back
From ground-breaking legislation for inclusion to reversion from inclusivity in primary education

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2015 brought steps towards inclusivity in Ireland and significant anniversaries in inclusive education. Despite taking some progressive national steps we retain several disparate agendas working separately towards stated but elusive goals of inclusivity in primary education, a space with great potential for truly cherishing all children of the nation equally.

Laws providing for inclusion of the formerly excluded were introduced in 2015 (Children and Family Relationships, Gender Recognition, Assisted Decision Making, Marriage Equality and Employment Equality legislation). Commitments were made to addressing other inequalities and exclusions (e.g. a revised National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, International Protection to improve provision for asylum seekers and a Roadmap to Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

Ireland has an excellent record of equality regulation and acceleration towards the implementation of 2015 statutes offers hope that these will influence lives in more meaningful and timely ways than seemingly ground-breaking Education laws previously augured for inclusive primary schools (Education Act of 1998 and Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004).

Collaborative national commitment established marriage equality in 2015, something that previously seemed much more unimaginable in Ireland than the apparently undisputed right to inclusive primary education. My journey with this societal development reminded me of the essentiality of paradigmatic shift for bringing about inclusive education, the reservations continuously encountered in a career dedicated to its realisation and, also, of its enduring possibility. It became clear that, outside of those deeply committed to the exclusion of some in order to preserve territory, most people's reservations about inclusive education (as with marriage equality) arise from erroneous beliefs about implications rather than any fundamental disagreement with the principle of everyone belonging equally in communities.

Access to marriage and to inclusive education appear very different but the barriers are similar: opposition to changing the status quo; fear of the threat posed by minorities to a heretofore powerful majority; marginalised groups in strained competition with each other because of financial resources or perceived limits to tolerable amount of diversity. Marriage will not be chosen by every person in Ireland from 2015 but everyone now has an equal right to choose. Some disapprove of this but majority endorsement ensured the removal of a legislative barrier to equal opportunity. There is no legislative barrier to inclusive education as there are many national and international

directives for its implementation already in place. The universal availability of mainstream primary education (where all children are welcome to belong as they are) would not interfere with individual or group rights to seek separation and specialised provision as choice. The current lack of automatic inclusion, however, renders education unequal for many.

Irish education policy and support mechanisms emphasise differences between children, excluded for various reasons. There is little credible evidence for the benefits of segregation (for the segregated or perceived normative groups from whom they are segregated) or for the existence of unique pedagogies for particular groups. Instead, effective inclusion, characterised by cultures of diverse belonging and sound application of good pedagogical approaches, has been found to benefit all learners. In Ireland, however, othering beliefs are consistently reinforced. Difference/deficit focus alienates the othered from each other and from those considered to fall within accepted norms. Belonging is falsely constructed as impossibly complicated and naïve. Failure to date in realising Inclusive Education is due to lack of commitment rather than any inherent unfeasibility of belonging differently and equally in Irish primary schools.

Research findings consistently support the benefits of inclusion. The European *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* (Watkins, 2012), for example, presents the following essential components for inclusivity: that inclusive education is an

> Failure to date in realising Inclusive Education is more a product of the lack of commitment to inclusivity than to any inherent unfeasibility of belonging differently and equally in Irish primary schools.

approach for all learners not just for the different or those at risk of exclusion; that inclusive and quality education cannot be viewed as separate issues and that those involved in education need to understand the historical roots of current situations and contexts. Ireland's fragmented approach, with disparate responsibilities for certain aspects/pupils and consistently reinforced dependence on policies, support and advice from various experts, is the ultimate barrier to inclusive primary education.

The persistent separation of social, intercultural and gender inclusions and the inclusion of pupils deemed to have special educational needs is baffling considering the lack of evidence for consistent group differences in terms of needs at primary level. Cherished divisions between organisations prohibit the possibility of inclusive education because they disempower mainstream educators by preventing adequate resourcing and efficacy-building within all schools. Reinforcing dissimilarities is more about safeguarding distinctive roles/attracting funding than any insurmountable differences between diverse groups of pupils. Universities, also, appear impervious to research findings and maintain silos of disparate inclusivities. Inclusion does not seek in any way to diminish diversity but the continued accentuation of differences has hindered inclusive education.

Current systemic reviews (e.g. curriculum, patronage, equal opportunity for pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and provision for pupils considered to have special educational needs) provide renewed opportunities for inclusion for all children. If the core values of inclusive education, which are highly correlated with effective education for all

learners, permeated initial teacher education, were supported by all education partners and emphasised during quality appraisals, it is likely that inclusive education would flourish and create the opportunity for every child to be welcome, and belong equally, at a local school.

25 years ago the *World Declaration on Education for All* prioritised universal access to primary schooling and removal of educational disparity. Annual Global Monitoring indicates that Ireland has achieved targets for universal enrolment at primary level. There has been less progress towards the elimination of disparity with no change in the significant learning gap between the most and least advantaged pupils from 2000 to 2012 (UNESCO 2015). As primary education is the most common encounter with formal learning globally, inclusion in this context is essential for progress, as experiences of belonginess and success or marginalisation and failure have a lifelong impact. Numerous Irish reports (Byrne and Smyth (2010); Smyth et al. (2011); Mc Coy et al. (2012); Smyth (2015)) indicate that disengagement from school is a significant problem for children not experiencing inclusion/success at primary level. Early disengagement can lead to low educational outcomes and/or early school leaving which in turn has a strong correlation with poor life outcomes.

It is 21 years since the *Salamanca Statement* of 1994 in which UNESCO furthered the *Education for All* agenda by reaffirming the rights of all children, including those who have disabilities or special educational needs, to an inclusive education in mainstream schools. It affirmed the effectiveness of inclusion in combatting discriminatory attitudes and achieving effective education for all. Irish legislation responded to this directive. *EPSEN* (2004), for example, legislated that education for children with disabilities be appropriately supported and provided in mainstream settings as far as practicable. Lack of sufficient progress, however, resulted in a 2009 review (Ware et al. 2009) concluding that a separate, special school system continued to be necessary despite decades of lobbying against segregation. Notwithstanding the current need for such provision, the accepted continuation of a separate school system for some in 2015 is inherently unequal, as was ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Warren, 1954). Existence/increase of segregated schools and failure to progress dual-enrolment or co-location are barriers to mainstream schools becoming equipped for inclusion.

20 years have passed since *Charting Our Education Future* (DES 1995) confirmed Ireland's commitment to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. It specified inclusive aims such as nurturing personal identity, self-esteem and awareness of one's abilities, aptitudes and limitations, combined with a respect for the rights and beliefs of others. This White Paper influenced inclusive clauses in the Education Act (1998), the introduction of Social, Personal and Health Education (DES 1996) and many child-centred aspects of the 1999 Curriculum (NCCA). This future-oriented and person-centred approach, advocating acknowledgement of and response to diversity, remains relevant and important in 2015. Some schools are potentially constrained from appreciating certain recognised human diversities as equal (e.g. family relationships and gender variance). Full analysis of the complex school patronage area is not possible here but examining inclusivity necessitates drawing attention to the fundamental barrier to inclusion posed by a majority of schools having the right to implement exclusionary clauses and

practices in order to preserve an ethos. The disingenuous use of inclusive nomenclature describing intrinsically exclusionary practices (e.g. in *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland: Sharing good Practice on Inclusion of all Pupils*: Catholic Schools Partnership 2015), illustrates conditional access being misconstrued as inclusion.

Two major inclusivity plans for Irish primary schools were introduced in 2005. *The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Irish Schools* (DEIS) plan and the *Organising of Teaching Resources for Pupils Who need Additional Support in Mainstream Primary Schools* circular (SP ED 02/05,) introduced the idea of combining resources and collaboration to facilitate inclusion and better outcomes for pupils. 2015 indicates reversion from this inclusive vision. Significant gains have been recorded in test outcomes for pupils in DEIS schools but the disparity between these pupils and pupils who do not attend such schools persists. Concerns remain about the impact of addressing disadvantage by providing compensatory resources in delineated schools where the high proportions of students experiencing disadvantage impede the transformative potential (Mc Coy et al 2014; Smyth et al. 2015). Developing inclusive teachers and schools could help address these persistent disparities in all schools (e.g. effective teaching approaches in heterogeneous classes, relationships with students; acceptance of learner diversity; high expectations for all; collaborative practices; use of varied, active learning methodologies and opportunities for further, in-service teacher education, to develop knowledge and skills of inclusive practice).

The General Allocation Model and approach (SP ED 02/05) announced intention to enable development of truly-inclusive schools. *The Implementation Report* (of EPSEN: NCSE 2006) set out ideological, practical and resource implications for the realisation of inclusive education. Shortly after these publications, however, enactment of EPSEN was paused. Continuous retreat from systemic inclusivity ensued resulting in the virtual abandonment of the vision for full inclusion. Recent policy advice, being piloted 2015-2016, considers inclusion at mainstream schools to now be but "an important principle" (NCSE 2014, p. 5). While the proposed new system of resource allocation is couched in some inclusive vocabulary, and there are some inclusive intentions e.g. removal of diagnostic-report requirements for accessing support, there is no longer a commitment to building inclusive capacity in all schools. Instead, a significant reduction in the baseline component proposed in 2005 is mooted, along with a move to allocate most resources according to school profiles that are essentially a measure of the amount of deficit for which evidence can be provided in each school. This proposed regression to focusing on degrees of deficit, with emphasis on "highly individualised programmes" (p. 32) heralds an alarming return to segregation within and between schools. A majority of pupils with support needs have at least average potential and could achieve accordingly, not merely be sustained at low attainment levels. Some schools, especially those with high proportions of disadvantage, may officially become the schools where children who have support needs (e.g. language, cultural, learning etc.) go because that is where the resources are.

Reversion threatens the loss of whatever ground was gained in terms of inclusivity in recent years.

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	Keyfacts
1	There is no legislative barrier to inclusive education as there are many national and international directives for its implementation already
2	Irish education policy and support mechanisms emphasise differences between children, excluded for various reasons.
3	Research findings consistently support the benefits of inclusion.
4	There has been less progress towards the elimination of disparity with no change in the significant learning gap between the most and least advantaged pupils from 2000 to 2012 (UNESCO 2015).
5	Early disengagement can lead to low educational outcomes and/or early school leaving which in turn has a strong correlation with poor life outcomes.
6	A majority of pupils with support needs have at least average potential and could achieve accordingly, not merely be sustained at low attainment levels.

chapter 1 | **Early Childhood**

Chapter 1   **Contents**

Early Childhood Education: Evolution and impact over the course of the year

By **Dr Nóirín Hayes**

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Introduction

This has been a busy year for early childhood education on a number of different fronts. The continued demand from parents for affordable early childhood education and care coupled with the sectoral demand for recognition and adequate remuneration, as exemplified by a national rally in Dublin on February 17, 2015, has kept the issue of early childhood firmly on the political agenda. For the purpose of this review, I have divided the piece into a number of segments covering policy; curriculum and practice; regulation and inspection, qualifications and investment.

Policy

In January 2015 the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs established an Inter-Departmental Group [IDG] to identify and assess options for improving the affordability, quality and supply of early years and after-school childcare. The group reported in September 2015 with a roadmap for the development of a system of 'wraparound' services. The report is the result of an extensive consultation process and a literature review within the context of the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Group Report *Right from the Start* (2013). It recognises that there are tensions at policy level as Ireland struggles towards the establishment of an integrated approach to supporting a high quality system of early education, one that meets the needs of all children and families irrespective of the settings they attend. The report points out that: '*cheap childcare in a deregulated system might support easier access to and affordability of childcare but could have detrimental effect on children as poor quality and low levels of*

qualifications have been shown to have negative effects on children's development outcomes. Similarly, rapid introduction of a very high bar of qualifications for pre-school education could have a very positive effect on child outcomes but is likely to increase cost, tighten supply and reduce accessibility and affordability for many parents' (DCYA, 2015:48).

> "The continued demand from parents for affordable early childhood education and care coupled with the sectoral demand for recognition and adequate remuneration has kept the issue of early childhood firmly on the political agenda."

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has noted that a number of the recommendations from this report informed the budgetary decisions announced in October 2015.

Curriculum and Practice

In their consideration of models of good practice, the IDG report notes that Ireland has two excellent frameworks to enhance quality early education, the Síolta national quality framework (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the national curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). In the absence of sufficient resources for rolling out a national training programme building on these frameworks, the NCCA has developed a web-based support for early childhood educators which became available in the summer of 2015. In the introduction to the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide,* the NCCA notes that the guide is designed to support '*practitioners in using Aistear*

Education Matters | **Yearbook 2015-2016** — EARLY CHILDHOOD **63**

*... and Síolta,... **together** to develop the quality of their curriculum and in doing so, to better support children's learning and development'.* The guide which can be accessed at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Practice-Guide comprises six interconnected Curricular Pillars and includes a variety of resources to guide the practitioner in reflecting on their curriculum and practice to identify what is working, select priorities and plan for individual children's development. In addition to the web-based support for the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*, a team of Early Childhood Specialists working with *Better Start* will use the guide in their work with individual settings.

Better Start Quality Development Service is a national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The aim is to bring an integrated approach to developing quality in Early Years Education and Care (ECEC) for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. Working with the existing City and County Childcare Committees and the Voluntary Childcare Organisations, it will coordinate and extend the wide-ranging choice of supports and services already available. In addition to this coordinating role, *Better Start* Early Childhood Specialists [ECSs] will provide a specialist on-site mentoring service. Working within the Aistear and Siolta frameworks, the ECSs will mentor staff in implementing their plans over an agreed time period. The service recognises the need to be flexible and adaptable to working within the demands and constraints of a busy early childhood education and care service. Details on the remit and work of *Better Start* can be found at https://www.pobal.ie/BetterStart/Pages/Home.aspx

While developing the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* for early years practitioners, the NCCA is also reviewing the *Primary School Curriculum*. Focusing initially on language and maths, it is expected that consultations on developing the Primary Curriculum-Infant Classes will commence in January 2016. The NCCA has noted previously that developments in this curricular area will '*espouse the principles and methodologies of Aistear...*' (2014:6).

Regulation and Inspection

The regulation and inspection of early childhood settings were, until recently, the responsibility of the Preschool Inspectorate under the Health Service Executive (HSE). This responsibility was transferred to the DCYA as part of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency (Ireland, 2013). The preschool inspection teams comprise public health nurses with general expertise in children's health and development and environmental safety. With the publication of Aistear (2009) and establishment of the Free Pre-School Year (2010), greater attention has been paid to the educational component of early childhood settings. In response to this the DCYA, alongside the Department of Education and Skills (DES), announced the establishment of an Early Years Education Inspectorate.

In its briefing paper *Early Years Education – focused Inspections in Early Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme: Briefing Paper* (May 2015), the DES notes that Early Years Education Inspectors [EYEIs] will provide the opportunity to extend the existing preschool inspection system. The EYEIs will focus on the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the Free Pre School Year (FPSY) and their main focus '*will be on the quality of the dynamic processes that facilitate children's learning in the early years setting... [and the] ongoing development of quality through co-professional dialogue between practitioners in early years settings and DES Early Years inspectors* (DES, 2015). Inspectors will be guided in their inspections by a quality framework, which has been informed by Aistear and Siolta. The proposed framework addresses four areas of quality for educational inspection (i) Quality of the context, (ii) Quality of the processes, (iii) Quality of the learning experiences and (iv) Quality of management and leadership. It is envisaged that the EYEIs will be fully operational early in 2016.

Some concern has been expressed by early years organisations that the separation of preschool inspection into two teams will be

unduly onerous on settings and may delay the development of an integrated model of education and care in terms of governance, funding and staff training. This is especially the case in relation to settings with children under three years old, where to date no qualification levels are required of staff and which remain outside of the remit of the EYEIs.

Qualification

The IDG report notes the importance of quality early childhood education to meeting positive outcomes for children. Within this context the report notes that '*[P]rofessionalisation of the workforce is a key proxy for quality in terms of the international evidence. The need for a better recognised and qualified workforce was a common theme across the parental and public consultation processes*' (2015:8).

Currently there are no qualification requirements for providers of early childhood education and care with the exception of those providing the FPSY. The Childcare Directorate at DCYA has stated levels of qualification which are considered appropriate for the FPSY room leaders. Participating settings receive the basic capitation rate where their FPSY room leader(s) have achieved a nationally accredited major award at Level 5 in early childhood care and education (or equivalent). A higher capitation rate is payable to preschool settings where the FPSY room leader(s) have achieved a nationally accredited award in early childhood care and education at level 7 (or equivalent) and their assistant(s) have achieved a major award at Level 5. It was anticipated that from September 2015 all FPSY room leaders would be required to have a minimum qualification at Level 6 and all other staff working with children in early years settings would be required to posses at least a Level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent). However, in June 2015 the DCYA announced that these requirements were being postponed until September 2016 to allow staff to access training. To facilitate this, the budget increased the Learner Fund to make more training available. Those working in early

childhood education can access this training at their own cost and in their own time. In March 2015 the Minister for Education and Skills announced a public consultation on early years education to contribute to a major review of early years qualifications. The purpose of the review *is to ensure that such education and training programmes provide childcare practitioners with appropriate competencies, knowledge and skills to support the educational development of children in early years services including full and part-time care, sessional services and child-minders* (DES, 2015). The review has yet to be published.

The need for a review of the qualifications in early childhood education became particularly evident when, in September 2015, the DCYA published a list of Early Years Recognised Qualifications. The purpose of the list is to identify those qualifications which will be acceptable under the forthcoming Early Years (Pre-school) Regulations, and the contractual requirements under the different DCYA funding programmes. The list comprises over 150 acceptable qualifications reflecting the historically ad hoc manner in which early education has evolved in Ireland and the fragmented nature of the early childhood education field in general.

Addressing this confused situation may be one of the early activities of a new association launched, on October 15th 2015. PLÉ [Pedagogy, learning, Education] is an association bringing together eighteen universities, institutes of technology, and colleges of education offering undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). In its Press Release it notes that PLÉ is '*committed to high quality education and continuing professional development for early years professionals, with the ultimate aim of enhancing children's experience of early childhood care and education and positive child outcomes. It aims to increase access to degree programmes, and to advocate for an increase in the number of graduates working in the early years sector by 2025'*. The arrival of this association of early education academics has been welcomed and offers the DES, and bodies such as the QQI, a new and informed association to turn to when

reviewing and refining the multiplicity of courses across various levels. More information on PLÉ at www.ple.ie

Investment

The IDG report acknowledges that investment in early education in Ireland is low at less the 0.2% of GDP as compared to the OECD average of 0.8%. The report goes on to note that [*T]he OECD, in drawing international comparisons on public expenditure on childcare and early education, adjusts for cross-national differences in the compulsory age of entry into primary school. Therefore, for countries where children enter school at age 5 – such as Ireland – expenditure on childcare and early education is adjusted by adding up the expenditure corresponding to children aged five who are enrolled in primary school. When Ireland's expenditure is adjusted in this way, the OECD reports that Ireland actually spends 0.5% of GDP* (2015:32).

The budget announcement in October has provided a modest increase in funding and lays the foundation for further developments into 2016. There was significant public attention to the budget announcement of an extension of the FPSY. Currently, children are eligible to access the scheme (15 hours x 38 weeks) between the ages of 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months. From September 2016 children will be able to start at age three and remain in the FPSY until they start primary school. In addition children will be able to enrol at three different points in the year – September, January and April. There are structural and financial implications arising from this proposal that have yet to be resolved and the direction of educational change raises a number of questions relating to school entry age, transitions and curricular and pedagogical continuity.

Conclusion

Early childhood education and care continues to be a major policy focus even as, within the sector, it strengthens its identity as a specific level of education. This is reflected in the many professional development and research activities of 2015. For instance, in April Early Childhood Ireland [ECI] hosted an evening where over 50 early childhood settings displayed their action-research projects on Learning Stories; in September the Dublin Institute of Technology, in partnership with ECI, hosted a visit and workshops from the renowned Reggio Emilia organisation; October saw a research symposium on Early Educational Alignment hosted by Trinity College Dublin School of Education in association with the NCCA, attended by over 80 participants and, also in October, the international Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education conference was hosted by the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown. Ireland was well represented at both European Early Childhood Education Research Association [EECERA] and European Education Research Association [EERA] and will host the EECERA conference in 2016 on the theme 'Happiness, Relationships, Emotion and Deep Level Learning' [See: http://www.eecera2016.org].

The indications are that 2016 will be an important year in the development of early childhood education in Ireland.

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On the road to a better place for our youngest citizens

By **Dr James Reilly**

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs it has been my privilege to travel all around Ireland meeting children and young people and also meeting the people who provide care and education to them. I have been struck by the energy and enthusiasm of all those I meet and I am also left with a clear sense of the value of investment in early years.

National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020

This government committed to fundamental reform of provision for children and families, and we have set out the goals of those reforms in the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020. The overarching vision of *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* is

> *to make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.*

I am proud to be part of a Government that has taken concrete steps in pursuit of that vision. We established the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and the dedicated Child and Family Agency Tusla, to bring a concentrated focus on improving services for children and families. We have put the Children's Referendum to the people and incorporated children's rights into the Irish constitution. And among many other initiatives, we have recently provided for a very significant increase in investment in early childhood care and education.

Interdepartmental Group

Earlier this year, I established an Interdepartmental Group tasked with setting out options for future investment in childcare and early education based on best international evidence and practice. Eight separate government departments were joined in the endeavour by a range of experts and academics and by representatives of the early childhood care and education sector. We engaged in consultation with parents and with the providers. This focused and strategic body of work successfully informed this year's budgetary estimates process.

Budget 2016

In Budget 2016 the level of funding provided to my Department for investment in the area was increased by one third, from €260 million up to €345 million. The extra investment has been widely welcomed, but for me as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs it is just the first step. The decision of Government represents a major endorsement of a report that maps out a plan for investment over the next number of years.

In summary, the key measures in Budget 2016 are:

» Free pre-school for every child when they reach age three until they make the transition to primary school. On average, this increases the current 38 weeks of provision by an average of 23 weeks – or up to as many as 50 extra weeks depending on a child's age when they start primary school.
» A new model of supports for children with a disability so that our preschools are fully inclusive. Ensuring that children with disabilities have every

opportunity to benefit from quality pre-school is a high priority of mine.

» An additional 8,000 places in 2016 under the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, which will – for the first time – be available through both not-for-profit and private providers.

» A range of measures to improve the provision of after-school childcare, including a capital fund to develop after-school services using existing school (and other community) facilities in conjunction with local providers, both community/ not-for-profit and private.

Quality

I am committed to ensuring that this significant additional investment in free pre-school is matched by significant improvements in quality. My Department has led the early years' quality agenda since 2013, and we continue to build and develop a range of measures to support providers in the challenge of continually improving quality. Some examples include:

» The *Better Start* initiative provides a nationally coherent continuum of support to help providers improve quality, and incorporates the new nationally coordinated Early Years Specialist Service. This service employs early childhood care and education graduates to work with services in a mentoring capacity to improve quality, including implementing the Síolta Framework and the Aistear curriculum.

» We are introducing new minimum qualification requirements of NFQ Level 5 (or equivalent) for all staff working in early years settings, or Level 6 for pre-school leaders.

» We incentivise higher qualifications by providing more funding to services with better qualified staff. Budget 2016 provided additional resources for the Learner Fund, which has already supported over 3,000 early years practitioners to upskill.

» A new registration system requires that all early years services are inspected by Tusla before they register, and that

there will be on-going inspections to monitor quality once the service is up and running

In addition to the initiatives outlined earlier, Budget 2016 also advanced the quality agenda, including:

» An audit of childcare quality to provide a solid evidence base on which to build quality. Regular audits over time will measure the impact of investment on higher quality;

» Independent accreditation under the Síolta Quality Assurance provides an objective quality mark. Funding in Budget 2016 will support further roll-out of this programme, so that more children benefit from high quality care.

» An expanded childcare inspection team to monitor compliance with new childcare regulations to be introduced shortly, and to build the education-focused inspections which DCYA began funding this year.

The journey has begun

Delivering the reforms we are seeking in early childhood care and education will require a programme of concerted action and investment over a number of years – and the investment required is considerable; the OECD reports that Ireland's investment in this area currently represents 0.5% of GDP. This compares to an average across the OECD of 0.8%, and UNICEF's international benchmark of 1% of GDP. Based on current GDP, every 0.1% increase in public expenditure on childcare requires additional investment of over €180 million.

The full year cost of measures announced in this Budget will increase public expenditure on childcare by almost 0.1% of GDP. Undoubtedly, it will take a number of years to reach the levels of investment recommended by the OECD and UNICEF. But we have taken the first steps.

Professionalization in Early Childhood Education and Care

By **Marian Quinn**

Chairperson of Association of Childhood Professionals and
Lecturer in Early Years and Montessori Education at Cork Institute of Technology

Early Childhood Education and Care is in a state of flux all over the world. Our understanding of child development and learning is deepening and there is constant discourse on many levels as to how we should support each child to meet their full potential. One such area of discourse is the *professionalization of the early childhood workforce.*

So what does this *professionalization* mean? In the Irish context it means the generation of policy documents and initiatives to support both high quality practice and the development of a qualified, experienced workforce to deliver a shared vision of high quality early childhood education and care.

Workforce Development Plan
A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland was published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. This document identified many action points to be met to support the development of the workforce. These actions include completion of the FETAC L6 award, making training accessible to practitioners, developing funding supports, developing systems for recognition of prior learning, etc. Some of these actions have been completed; others are in process and many more remain on the drawing board.

Minimum Qualifications
In 2013 Minister Fitzgerald announced the imminent introduction of minimum qualification requirements for the ECEC workforce, with the deadline set for September 2015. The introduction of the Learner Fund in 2014 provided funding for early years practitioners to gain their QQI Level 5/6 ECEC qualification in preparation for this introduction. The Pobal *Annual Early Years Sector Survey Report 2014* (2015) stated that 87.3% of the workforce have attained a qualification level of NFQ L5 or higher, with just over 50% of the workforce having NFQ L6 or higher.

2015 saw a second round of the Learner Fund to support practitioners to meet the pending minimum requirements. There were many calls from within the workforce for the expansion of this fund to include practitioners studying for a L7 or higher qualification however to date the DCYA has not answered this call. A further disappointment for the workforce came in June when the DCYA announced the postponement of the minimum qualification requirement until September 2016.

> "Regulations and standards are reviewed and revised by civil servants while practitioners anxiously wait to see what will be required of them next."

Early Years Recognised Qualifications
In September 2015 the DCYA published a list of Early Years Recognised Qualifications that are recognised for the purpose of meeting the requirements of the Regulations and DCYA Childcare Programmes Contracts. The establishment of this list is a significant milestone in the professionalization of the workforce as it sets out acceptable qualifications for assistant and leader roles. Most of those listed relate to ECEC qualifications from NFQ L5–L9. There is however a number of outliers that require further scrutiny. The inclusion of medical

and therapeutic qualifications such as Post-graduate Certificate in Therapeutic Play Skills, Postgraduate Diploma in Play Therapy and Nursing Degrees would lead one to question the DCYA's view of the purpose of early childhood education and care.

The Early Childhood Education Profession

According to the *Model Framework of Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (2002) ECEC is a profession that is built on a multidisciplinary approach and has six identified areas of core knowledge and skills:

1. Child Development
2. Personal and Professional Development
3. Social Environment
4. Health, Hygiene, Nutrition and Safety
5. Education and Play
6. Communication, Administration and Management

The Model Framework also outlined the level of supervised practical experience required for each level of practitioner profile. This ranges from 160–500 hours of supervised practical experience in an ECCE setting. There is no disputing that play therapists, nurses and therapeutic play skills practitioners have a comprehensive understanding of many of the areas of core knowledge and skills outlined in the Model Framework. What could be disputed, though, is whether the focus of this core knowledge and skills is sufficiently aligned with what is required to develop and deliver an early years' curriculum that provides learning opportunities to scaffold the holistic development of the child and support each child to develop as a competent and confident learner.

The preface to the list of recognised qualifications does not outline the criteria used by the DCYA and DES in deciding which qualifications should be included or excluded. What percentage of these training courses was dedicated to recognising and supporting early childhood learning? How many hours of supervised practical experience took place in an ECEC setting? Did

the course include a comprehensive study of the practice frameworks, Aistear and Síolta, which form the base for high quality ECEC in Ireland? The answers to these questions would provide a valuable insight as to how the DCYA views the profession of early childhood education and care.

No consultation with practitioners

The early years workforce in Ireland has little or no autonomy in the development of members' chosen field. Policies are developed and imposed with little or no meaningful consultation with those who work on the frontline. Regulations and standards are reviewed and revised by civil servants while practitioners anxiously wait to see what will be required of them next. Lists of recognised qualifications are published without the workforce being aware that this was a work in progress. Investment decisions are made by finance ministers who continue to view 'childcare' as a requirement for supporting a growing workforce rather than for the value it has for young children. All of these factors provide a threat to the professionalization of early childhood education and care.

Growing body of research

An element of professionalization that is growing is the amount of field research and publications that practitioners and academics are producing. This was very much evident at the OMEP Ireland and Early Childhood Ireland conferences in 2015. For ECEC to become a profession this research output needs to be maintained and funded.

Conclusion

The journey towards professionalization is a long and arduous one. At times it seems to be one step forward and two steps back but in general progress is being made and this will continue in 2016 when we will finally have a fully qualified workforce and a steady move towards a graduate led workforce. The coming year will also see a workforce uniting to share the development of their profession with the policy makers and funders rather than waiting for policies to be developed and imposed from the outside.

Curricular Development with the support of Better Start

By **Mary Skillington**

Early Years Specialist with Better Start

Better Start is a new national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to establish a single, cohesive approach to quality across the ECEC sector in Ireland for children from birth to six years. The primary focus of the Better Start Quality Development Service is to provide quality early years mentoring support to ECEC settings. This is done through the allocation of Early Years Specialists (EYS) who provide on-site mentoring to staff and managers in early years' services at their request.

Mentoring

The mentoring process engages educators in reflecting on their values and their practice. At the heart of this process is early educators' image of children based on which they make decisions about curriculum. The Specialists work with the managers and staff to build on the knowledge, strengths and experience of staff within services in order to enhance the quality of ECEC provision to young children. Quality development goals are agreed after engaging in discussion and joint-assessment based on the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide, newly developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. As Early Years Specialists, we actively promote and use the evidence-based Self-Evaluation tools of the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide.

Importance of the individual child

Early Years Specialists facilitate and encourage early years educators to consider the importance of the individual child as a learner with knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes that they bring with them to their experience in ECEC settings. Children possess extraordinary potential for learning with studies from neuroscience offering evidence that babies' brains learn about the world in much the same way that scientists do—by exploring their world, making choices and forming intuitive theories (Gopnik et al., 1999). The science of early childhood tells us that what happens in the early years of life can have a profound impact on the developing brain (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). The young brain is very responsive and grows and matures in constant interaction with the environment with healthy development dependent on appropriate experiences. With this in mind, the Better Start Quality Development Service is being offered initially to large Full Day Care services with an emphasis on children under three, but will be extended to all services over time.

Curriculum

Curriculum is a constant dynamic interplay between children, adults and the environment as children are provided with experiences which are meaningful. Children's thinking grows in complexity when curriculum experiences are grounded in their interests. The role of the educator is crucial in working "with" children by providing time and space as they observe the kinds of questions children are exploring and the experience and knowledge they bring from their home and community. In our mentoring role, we work alongside educators, facilitating reflection on their role in providing a curriculum that is alive and meaningful for children and themselves. This reflective space provides an opportunity for educators to gain perspectives on their practice including how their behaviours,

expectations and experiences from their own childhood can impact on what they see as important when planning for, and engaging with children.

Promoting optimal development among children from birth to 6 years of age requires quality caregiver–child interactions and appropriate learning experiences. For babies and toddlers, responsive interactions are central to the curriculum and these interactions are primarily based on nonverbal cues. The learning journey that babies and toddlers embark upon can be filled with small discrete elements that may not be easily recognised. Seeing the significance of what children are learning requires reflective educators to be keen observers as they tune into the small details of what the child might be thinking.

The value of play
The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* values play, recognizing that the best curriculum emerges out of ideas children are interested in exploring. When educators observe children as they engage with people, materials, ideas or events, they identify their interests and their understanding of children's development deepens and their curriculum planning becomes rich in possibilities. This more intentional planning further promotes curiosity and means that children are intrinsically motivated to learn. Children become creators of curriculum provided that educators demonstrate that they 'trust' in their competence. This takes a real shift in thinking and a willingness to 'share control' as they plan for investigation and process–led learning rather than product–led learning. Below is a child

intently engaged in painting, organising his thoughts and making decisions. Contrast this with a piece of perfectly symmetrical artwork that passes the "bring home test" often completed with adult help. Children gain mastery over painting through repetition as they work on their own agenda.

The writings of Lilian Katz (1995) have influenced *Aistear* as demonstrated in the inclusion of dispositional learning, which emphasises how children approach learning. We recognise that early childhood is a critical period for nurturing positive learning dispositions such as curiosity, purposefulness, perseverance, concentration, resilience, imagination and self–control.

Professional Development
The quality development process is a continual one and as Early Years Specialists we embark on a journey of professional development with educators. This journey is based on collaboration, a willingness to engage in the process of enquiry and self–reflection. We seek to understand the strengths and resources of each service we engage with. There are challenges along the way but we offset these by ensuring that we listen to services to understand the needs, contexts and priorities for quality development within a particular service. It has been inspiring to see the willingness of many educators to be open to new information, practice and pedagogy as they pursue their vision for quality early education and care experiences for children.

For more information on Better Start Quality Development Service, please contact www.betterstart.ie

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Improving Early Numeracy Outcomes

By **Dr Josephine Bleach**

Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Working together to support young children's ability to enjoy and use mathematics effectively

Early Learning Initiative at National College of Ireland

Since 2010, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland, has been working with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services, primary schools, libraries and health centres in the Dublin Docklands to improve numeracy outcomes for children aged 0-6 years using a range of developmentally appropriate and challenging mathematical experiences chosen from *Aistear* (NCCA 209). Over 1,000 children and their parents took part in the programme in 2014-15. National and local evaluations show that the children's numeracy outcomes are improving (Lalor 2013, McKeown et al 2014). Awareness of the importance of early mathematical learning among professionals and parents has increased with everyone continuing to work collaboratively to improve the numeracy outcomes for children. Mathematics is now perceived as enjoyable and something to be shared across the community. This paper will explore the rationale for the programme, the methodology used along with the key components of the programme.

What the research said

In 2010, national and international reports (Eivers et al 2010) were highlighting how young people in Ireland were poorly prepared for future Mathematical needs as students and citizens. Other research (Every Child a Chance Trust 2009) reported enormous differences in the mathematical knowledge of children when they began school with opportunities for pre-schoolers to learn mathematics often very inadequate (National Academy of Sciences 2009). Unfortunately, those that were among the least advanced of their class remained so

> **"Mathematics is now perceived as enjoyable and something to be shared across the community. "**

throughout their schooling and often gave up on Mathematics. Even for those who remained in education, the lack of proficiency in maths-based subjects was a trigger for non-completion at third level (HEA 2010). Based on this research and the belief that early learning is the foundation for all subsequent learning, the numeracy programme was initiated.

Numeracy programme developed

With funding initially from the National Early Years Access Initiative and subsequently through the Area Based Childhood Programme, an integrated programme of activities, training and support for local children, parents and professionals was developed. Ensuring continuity and progression in mathematical learning for children moving from home to early years settings

> **"This project highlights the importance of all the adults in children's lives working together to support children's ability to enjoy and use mathematics effectively in their lives, whether at home, at school, crèche or pre-school and in the community."**

to the local schools through the implementation of *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and *Síolta*

(CECDE 2006) is a key objective. The numeracy learning outcomes and learning activities are drawn from *Aistear,* while *Síolta* is used to reflect on and improve the quality of practice in numeracy (Bleach 2015). Community action research is the research methodology used as it is closely related to the *Síolta* Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation (CECDE 2006) as well as the school development planning process, which improves teaching and learning through the successful management of innovation and change (DES 1999). In this way, national policy and local practice are aligned, thereby preventing fragmentation and overload for participants. The key ingredients responsible for the success of the programme are:

> Engaging in a variety of mathematically related activities across different areas of learning, including real-life, hands-on experiences, helps children understand the use of abstract symbols and distinguish the virtual and imaginary from reality.

Collective Planning works
A termly cycle of planning, implementing, evaluating, communicating and reviewing is used. The cycle begins with a working group developing fun, play-based activities and events based on Mathematical themes such as number, shape, space and size. Each member of the working group takes responsibility for communicating and leading the implementation process within their own service. The programme's success is due to the enthusiasm, creativity and hard work of all involved.

Exploring and thinking is critical
Children do not appear to learn one mathematical concept after another. Learning mathematics resembles 'doing a jigsaw' with concepts acquired as new experiences enlighten previous ones (NCCA 2014). Children need time to explore and think about the world around them if they are develop their mathematical skills. Engaging in a variety of mathematically related activities across different areas of learning, including real-life, hands-on experiences, helps children understand the use of abstract symbols and distinguish the virtual and imaginary from reality.

Open-ended mathematical conversations
Having open-ended conversations with adults encourages children to think deeply and make their own theories about how the world works. This dialogical pedagogy of argumentation and discussion designed to support effective conceptual learning (NCCA 2014) requires practitioners and parents alike to use mathematical language in everyday situations. A simple comment, when children are building with blocks, such as, '*I see you have put the blue cuboid on top of the red one. How high do you think you will build your tower?*' helps to develop children's understanding of sequencing, shape and space. By ending with a question, the adult is giving them the opportunity to continue the conversation and to practice the mathematical language they are learning.

Pure mathematics is the world's best game
It can be played anywhere – Archimedes did it in a bathtub (Trudeau 1978). Learning through play is fundamental to good mathematics pedagogy in early childhood (NCCA 2014). Play enables children to make mental images of what they are doing, thereby helping their understanding of symbols. For example, to understand the symbol "4", children have to be able to imagine four things. To be able to imagine four things, they need to arrange lots of things in groups of four. The more opportunities children get to explore mathematical concepts through play, the more their mathematical knowledge and

> "The more parents engaged with their children's mathematical learning, the more their children's numeracy skills improved."

skills develop. This early exposure makes solving more abstract mathematical problems easier later on in school.

Partnership with Parents

A key element of the programme is the home-based activities. Parents found the programme very useful in helping them think about and support their children's learning. As parents told us, '*It helped me to understand simple things I can do at home with my child to help improve his numeracy skills. It helped me realise the things I was not doing and wasn't aware I should be doing with my child to work on those skills.'* The more parents engaged with their children's mathematical learning, the more their children's numeracy skills improved.

This project highlights the importance of all the adults in children's lives working together to support children's ability to enjoy and use mathematics effectively in their lives, whether at home, at school, crèche or pre-school and in the community. One practitioner summed it up, *'They really grasped the concept, reinforced @ home and in school. Maths was great fun'.*

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The challenge of developing a qualified workforce for Early Childhood Education

By **Deirdre Rogers**
Glass artist, designer and educator
involved in teaching programmes for more than 15 years

'I'm not very creative' is a common statement I hear from educators when facilitating workshops. If we believe this about ourselves how does it reflect on our teaching practice?

I feel we often confuse artistic talent with creative talent. It is not about how 'creative' you think you are as an individual but how open you are to alternative ways of thinking, and how aware of potential avenues of investigation given by the children in their response to stimuli that you introduce. If we rely on templates, each child producing the same product, we are missing the rich learning experiences that can happen through the exploration of process.

The experience of drawing upside-down
Take an exercise where young children are exploring the works of Michelangelo and his paintings in the Sistine Chapel. A natural question raised by a child could be 'what is it like to draw on the ceiling?' Very difficult, I would presume, but this simple question provokes curiosity and, when embraced, encourages a child-led process that can be used creatively and with great effect. By drawing on a sheet of paper stuck to the underside of their desks, the children are allowed to experience somewhat how the artist must have felt when painting this giant ceiling. The process also conjures up further emotions such as the physicalities of drawing upside-down; 'my arm gets very tired very quickly' or 'will the paint run down my arm?' This process brings the initial topic into the real world for the children while integrating many other curricular subjects that can be explored and questioned further. The exercise does not rely on any 'artistic' talent on the part of the teacher but on listening to the children and reacting creatively to their questions, and allowing a process of learning to be introduced that leads to avenues of investigation and a higher quality of learning and retention of information than if the initial question was ignored.

Cross-curricular integration of visual and creative arts
Children learn by doing, and using the visual and creative arts as a tool to enhance this process is not only an invaluable source of inspiration, its potential for cross-curricular integration should be embraced. When used to enhance a learning experience within other subjects, it reaches a much deeper level, enriching children's understanding of the world around them and where they see themselves in it. Allowing children to explore their environment through creative practice also enables them to make connections through personal experiences. They do not naturally set boundaries within their thought process so their exploration will create connections and dialogue with other areas of knowledge.

ReCreate
My experience as Arts Coordinator for ReCreate (www.recreate.ie) in 2015 has given me a deeper insight into the value and rich potential of working through the arts with children, their teachers and parents. ReCreate offers a wide and varied range of materials to its members for creative reuse. The large volumes of materials such as wool, fabric, plastics, paper and wood are tactile and 'hands-on', provoking curiosity and investigation. The possibilities for

open-ended play and self-expression are also enriched by the materials' versatility, sparking the imagination and producing outcomes that are not experienced with the usual 'art' materials in many educational settings.

ReCreate Revolution – Creativity in the Community

In the coordinating and facilitation of workshops with ReCreate, as part of their 'ReCreate Revolution – Creativity in the Community' project, we introduced educators to a 'new' way of exploring creative expression with the materials, helping them develop their own creative practice and upskill through the visual arts. Our aim was to give them the knowledge and confidence to engage these new methods of practice in their classroom. The results are encouraging and exciting. 'You have reawakened my inner child' and 'changed my mind-set' were just two of the comments made during these workshops. ReCreate's materials, with their endless possibilities and diversity, evoke reactions, conversations, creations and activities that would otherwise not have been possible. The creative process is about exploration and engagement. For the children, participation in creative activities with these materials also helps strengthen motor and language development, decision making, visualisation, sequencing, inventiveness, critical thinking and problem solving.

> "The creative process is about exploration and engagement."

As an educator and visual artist, primarily working in the medium of glass, I can see how my process of making can be transferred into the classroom. For example, I begin with a theme or idea which I then research, sketching and documenting information. This leads to experimentation with materials, designing and making. This to me is the most valuable part of the process and includes language, maths, and writing skills. The information gathered can be revisited many times, leading to new ideas

and development that would not have happened without being open to all the possibilities.

Creating an environment aesthetically pleasing to the child

In my collaborations with other artists such as Orla Kelly of Early Childhood Creativity, I have learnt that the environment in which we want children to explore, engage and learn is just as important as the activities we provide. By being aware of our surroundings, its relevance and comfort, the distractions and stimuli, we can enhance the interaction and learning capabilities of children and stimulate their imagination. We should be conscious of creating an environment to explore that is aesthetically pleasing to a child and not ourselves. As adults we tend to over-complicate things, we are constantly bombarded with clutter, colour and objects. From a child's perspective this can be confusing. If we scale back we can focus on the task or objective at hand, allowing for full concentration and absorption of the process.

Importance of documenting

Documenting, looking and responding within the classroom are also invaluable tools. Collecting children's responses – through recordings, drawings, photography and the written word – often opens up new levels of thinking and can change our approach to subjects or themes that we may have struggled with in the past. Sharing our observations and displaying the children's work within the school leads to the expansion of the process into other classes, the school environment, and the community.

Aistear themes

By using the six primary school visual arts strands as a guide, the integration of creative practices throughout the curriculum also embraces the four themes of Aistear: Wellbeing, Identity & Belonging, Communicating and Exploring & Thinking. Not only are these themes important in a child's early development but should be carried through their entire education and into adult life, producing confident, independent, creative thinkers and learners.

Should young children play video games?

By **Dr Vanessa Murphy**

Lecturer in Early Years Education at Cork Institute of Technology

Should young children be allowed to play video games? In a word – yes! A simple answer to what is most definitely a complex question.

There are many misgivings about '*gaming*' and sensational media headlines continue to fuel these uncertainties. The reality is that decades of research has scientifically established many wide-ranging benefits of playing computer games and directly invalidated a number of frequently highlighted negative assertions. As an educator with experience working in ECCE, Primary School and now lecturing on Early Years Education and Montessori degree programmes, I have a vested interest in exploring this question considering that there are more than 1.2 billion people playing computer games worldwide with reports of figures as high as 99% of boys under 18 and 94% of girls under 18 playing video games regularly (Granic, et al, 2014; ESRB, 2014; Diele, O., 2013; McGonigal, J., 2011).

> "The reality is that decades of research has scientifically established many wide-ranging benefits of playing computer games and directly invalidated a number of frequently highlighted negative assertions."

Video Games and Aggression

Concerns that there is an association between video games and violent or aggressive behaviour in children and young people have emerged over the years. This area has been studied for decades with varied results being reported. Meta-analysis of these studies indicates that no causal relationship has been established. "Structural equation modelling suggested that family violence and innate aggression as predictors of aggressive behaviour and violent crime were a better fit to the data than was exposure to video game violence." (Reuters, 2015, p.18).

It is worth noting that many video games are not violent and all games have age specific certificate / category clearly labelled on the cover. The Entertainment Software Rating Board, a self-regulatory body established in 1994, has a rating system that considers the amount of violence, sex, controversial language, and substance abuse found in a game and then assigns an age recommendation and content descriptor to each game. Two of these categories include "Early Childhood (EC) - content should be suitable for children 3 years and older and contain no objectionable material" and "Everyone (E) - content suitable for persons ages 6 and older. The game may contain minimal violence and some "comic mischief" (ESRB, 2015).

> "There are more than 1.2 billion people playing computer games worldwide with reports of figures as high as 99% of boys under 18 and 94% of girls under 18 playing video games regularly."

Video games and obesity

The decline in frequency and intensity of physical activity experienced by children in Ireland in conjunction with increased use of technology like consoles, PC's, tablets and

phones has undoubtedly contributed to a range of health related conditions over the years including obesity. However, a study compiled by Computers and Human Behaviour (2011) found that while video games were used more than the internet and mobiles, "none of these activities predicted a child's weight or BMI. Instead they found that race, age and socioeconomic status were the strongest predictors" (Jackson, et al, 2011, p599). Findings of a three year study published by Child Health & Exercise Medicine Program (2013) similarly found that video games are not solely to blame for childhood obesity; in fact, according to Milenkovic's Pre-School Focus article (2013), interactive video games that get children up and moving can help them become more active and lessen the likelihood of weight gain. Likewise, Waine (2007) reported that children were six times more likely to take to exercise if it involved a video game.

> "According to Milenkovic's Pre-School Focus article (2013), interactive video games that get children up and moving can help them become more active and lessen the likelihood of weight gain."

Benefits of Video Games

Professor Jenkins, director of comparative studies at MIT, claims that a large gap exists between the public's perception of video games and what the research actually shows (2012). The table below is a collated list of benefits of playing video games on child development.

Contrary to stereotypes, the average gamer is not socially isolated (Lenhart et al., 2008) with 70% of gamers playing video games with a friend, either cooperatively or competitively (Granic, et al, 2014). In fact, playing games actually leads to pro-social behaviour. Recent studies have established transfer of learning whereby playing video games leads to increased cooperative behaviours outside of the gaming context. Apparently, "even the most violent video games on the market (Grand Theft Auto IV, Call of Duty) fail to diminish subsequent pro-social behaviour" (Ewoldsen et al., 2012, p119). Research at Deakin University showed that preschool-aged children who played interactive games had better "object control motor skills" than those who did not and cognitive researcher Daphne Bavalier in the Journal of Neuroscience (2011) discusses how video games can help us to learn, concentrate and, interestingly, to multitask. Moreover, findings published

Positive Effects of Video Gaming for young Children		
1 Quick Thinking	2 Persistence	3 Developing Numeracy
4 Precision	5 Pattern Recognition	6 Concentration
7 Strategy	8 Approximating Skills	9 Respond To Challenges
10 Anticipation	11 Inductive Reasoning	12 Exploring
13 Situational Awareness	14 Hypothesis Testing	15 Experimenting
16 Developing Literacy	17 Taking Risks	18 Memory
19 Perseverance	20 Respond To Frustrations	21 Rapidly Processing Data
22 Resilience	23 Mapping	24 Reasoned Judgements
25 Rethink Goals	26 Cooperation	27 Communication
28 Collaboration	29 Teamwork	30 Management
31 Problem Solving	32 Motivation	33 Decision Making
34 Creativity	35 Identity - Self Creating	36 Motivation

Table 1. Benefits of playing video games on child development. Compiled by V. Murphy - contributed in part by: Education & Health (2002); American Psychological Association (2014)

in the peer reviewed Journal of Cybertherapy and Telemedicine (2009) outlined that children experiencing mental health issues such as stress and depression showed a noted improvement if they played video games.

Summary

In short, video games can aid holistic development and make learning fun. Video games are awash with possibilities and the chance of emersion. Games offer motivational rewards and challenges; opportunities to practice and master skills (aiding the development of confidence and self-esteem); games can be great as a form of stress relief; they can facilitate the internalization of motivation; help with identity awareness and enhance creative as well as critical thinking skills.

The overall message is to be informed, not afraid. When selecting games consider the rating and game descriptors and provide suitable supervision based on the child's maturity level, applying the same parameters and autonomy as monitoring television and other media exposure. The key is moderation. Too much 'screen time' or any form of sedentary activity will not lead to a healthy body and mind. For a child to become a well-rounded, balanced individual, they will need a variety of learning experiences.

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Children: Some more equal than others

By **Mag Coogan**

Early Years Educator and Owner of the ABC Club

Ireland is gradually shifting from a medical model of early childhood care and education to to a more social model of inclusion, and children with special needs today have a lot more on offer than their counterparts from the past.

What is a Special Need?

Defining a Special Need (SN) is difficult. However, I believe in this context it is when participation in early education is dependent on extra support. Including children with special needs in Early Years (EY) settings is *not* a straight-forward matter and requires consultation and collaboration with the parents and intervention team to assess a child's needs and establish how their best interests can be met. Ireland has no system of supports for children with SN in EY settings. However, in some counties, the HSE gives a "discretionary subsidy" for assistants to work with the children.

> "Ireland has no system of supports for children with SN [Special Needs] in EY [Early Years] settings."

Legislation in place but serious lack of commitment

While legislation and policy is in place on inclusion of children with SN in education, there has been a serious lack of commitment and investment by successive Governments to the EY sector. Research indicates that early intervention is the key for children to become active, engaged citizens in their communities. Inclusion can "*support children's identity (individual and group) and their sense of belonging. Foster children's empathy and support them to be comfortable with differences between children. Encourage each child to think about diversity and bias. Empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations*" (Start Strong, 2013).

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

In 1992, Ireland ratified The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, bringing in the core principles which include: the child's right not be discriminated against (Article 2); the best interests of the child are a primary consideration (Article 3); children have the right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and the child's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting them (Article 12). Article 23 focuses on children with SN and how they should be supported and treated to promote self-reliance and become active citizens in their environments and communities.

Supports needed for inclusive environments

Under the Childcare Act, 1991; Preschool Regulations, Part V11, 2006, Regulation 5, preschools must "ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service" (Dept. of Health (DoH)). The ratio of 1 adult to 11 children permitted by this same legislation *does not* support a child with SN. The Disability Act, 2005 (DoH) charges the HSE with responsibility for assessments and referrals. Consideration is given to the nature of the disability; health and education needs; the services required and a timescale for delivery and review of assessment. *If and when assessment occurs, children are placed on waiting lists which vary in timescale between counties for therapies.* The Education

for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004 (EPSEN) and the Education Act, 1998, while aimed at primary education, promote the idea that children will be educated in inclusive environments (Dept. Education and Skills (DES)). *Education begins at birth, the early years being the most formative. At this time brains are developing and life skills are being learned.* Both Síolta 2006, the EY Quality Framework and Aistear 2009, the EY Curriculum Framework have equality and diversity embedded in their principles and EY settings have contracted to adhere to these principles. *However, without supports this often proves difficult.*

'Free' preschool year not free for SN children

In 2010, the Government introduced the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme. It is advertised as a "free pre-school year" (Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)). However, it is *not* free to parents of children with SN where extra supports may be required. A lack of strategies to support these children to participate with their peers means the Government is blatantly discriminating against them. "*Instead of the Government helping people like us, I feel we're being punished. I have a child with a disability and I am paying more than a person with a child who doesn't have a disability*" states Niamh. Her son, Cian says "*I like to play with my friends*". Cian has cerebral palsy, is confined to a specialised chair and requires assistance to attend the EY setting for his "free" year.

Three Government departments

Responsibility for EY care and education falls between three Government departments', the DoH, DES, and DCYA, all of which issue legislation/policy/reports and inspections on the sector. Indeed, the DCYA has a report imminent on children with SN in preschools, unavailable at time of going to print. Will this document recommend

> "[The] free preschool year… is not free to parents of children with SN where extra supports may be required."

investment to support inclusion in the EY sector?

Ireland Fight for the Future Campaign is a committee of parents of children with SN and EY professionals who joined forces in Meath to fight for the retention of a 6 hour subsidy provided by the HSE which was being withdrawn. Thankfully, they were successful in maintaining the subsidy for the present academic year. They have developed a **Call for Action** from the Government to give commitment to funding inclusion of young children with SN to participate in EY settings and ensure equality for all children regardless of ability. This should include:

1. Availability on request, funding for employment of extra staff based on the need of the child. This should not be diagnosis dependent.

2. A commitment to provide training and continuous professional development (CPD) for the EY services, general and specific, to the needs of the child.

3. Equipment and play/learning resources available from a central location for use in the services subject to the needs of the child.

4. View the EY provider as a professional and include them as part of the early intervention team in developing and implementing therapies with the child in an inclusive play approach.

5. Identify one professional body in each county to take responsibility for children with SN accessing preschools and for the distribution of funding and developing the criteria for same.

6. Implement as a priority the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004 and the Disability Act, 2005.

To endorse this document, email Irelandfightforthefuture@gmail.com. It's time for Ireland to stand together and Fight for the future of Inclusion.

Postgraduate Scholarship Programme for early-stage researchers

By **Rita Melia**

Early Childhood Ireland

The Irish Research Council (IRC) offers an Employment Based Postgraduate Scholarship Programme for early-stage researchers in all disciplines, which enables them to work in a co-educational environment involving a higher education institute and an employment partner, while obtaining a Masters or PhD qualification.

Through the Programme, the IRC supports a range of enterprise with a physical operational base in Ireland, in particular SME's including registered charities, social, cultural, not-for-profit, governmental or non-government organizations. As part of the Programme, the employment partner commits to employing the scholar for the duration of the award.

Recipient

I have been lucky enough to obtain a place on the IRC Employment Based Scholarship Programme, to undertake a Structured PhD in Child & Youth Research at NUI Galway in the College of Arts, Social Sciences & Celtic Studies, School of Psychology, and UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the university.

Prior to receiving the IRC scholarship, I was employed as head of membership directorate by Early Childhood Ireland, a national voluntary childcare organisation with over 3,500 members, most of whom are owners/managers of preschools. In my PhD research I am exploring the educator's image of the child as a learner and how this impacts on the adult/ child interactions and relationships and children's subsequent wellbeing and developing self-image.

Benefits for all three partners

There are three partners in the Employment Based Scholarship Programme: (i) the student, (ii) the employer, (iii) the academic institution. Each partner benefits considerably from this collaborative approach to research.

As the researcher, my research is being supervised by experts in both academia and enterprise. My academic supervisor, Dr Cormac Forkan, School of Sociology and Political Science at NUI Galway, as well as Dr Carmel Brennan, Head of Practice Early Childhood Ireland, are both guiding me on my learning journey. Having worked for many years in the early childhood education sector, conducting research under the supervision of the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre offers the opportunity to link research/theory to practice.

The benefits for the employment partner, Early Childhood Ireland, are also significant. This scholarship offers the organisation an opportunity to upskill an existing employee, while also developing further links and other possible collaborations with NUI Galway. There is also the potential to build further research networks and collaborations with other higher education institutions both nationally and internationally.

For the academic institution NUI Galway, this partnership offers the opportunity to link with an organisation that works directly with the early childhood education sector in Ireland.

For further details on the Irish Research Council Employment Based Postgraduate Programme, log onto www.research.ie.

Pictured at the launch of Better Start at the Mansion House in Dublin: **Dr James Reilly** *TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (speaker);* **Dr Fergal Lynch**, *Secretary General in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs;* **Margaret Rogers**, *National Manager Better Start;* **Una Hill**, *Director of Bonnybrook Early Education Centre.*

Formal launch of Better Start

The Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service was launched on 14th May 2015 by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Dr James Reilly in the Oak Room, Mansion House, Dublin 2. The national service, established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, will integrate a national approach to developing quality in early years education and care for children aged from birth to six years old.

Back to Childhood

Dr James Reilly, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, pictured with Sligo school children in the Early Years Childhood Care and Education skills laboratory at the Institute of Technology Sligo. This purpose-designed pre-school education facility is used to teach undergraduates the skills needed to nurture vital learning abilities during the early years.

Pictured at the launch in IT Sligo of the Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education Services l-r: **Dr Perry Share**, *Head of School of Business & Social Sciences IT Sligo;* **Dr James Reilly**, *Minister for Children and Youth Affairs;* **Dr Breda McTaggart**, *Head of Department of Social Science IT Sligo; and* **Tom Reilly**, *Head of Strategy and Planning IT Sligo.*

Launch of Report on Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education

A major childcare services report published by Dr James Reilly, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, in July 2015 proposed three main areas for incremental investment: a longer period of parental leave to enhance outcomes in the first year of a child's life; an enhanced ECCE provision which would be extended to the point at which primary school starts; and a new single subsidy scheme for pre-school and school-going children with simplified eligibility based on income.

POSTGRADUATE EMPLOYMENT BASED SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME

The Irish Research Council (IRC) offers an Employment Based Postgraduate Scholarship Programme for early-stage researchers in all disciplines.

Pictured at the launch of the Irish Research Council Employment Based Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme in Dublin in December 2014 were: **Dr. Cormac Forkan**, *UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUI Galway,* **Damien English** *TD, Minister of State for Skills Research and Innovation,* **Dr. Carmel Brennan**, *Early Childhood Ireland, and* **Rita Melia**, *PhD Candidate and Funding Recipient.*

Pictured at the launch of the Growing Up in Ireland report, Maternal Health Behaviours and Child Growth in Infancy l to r: **Ms Amanda Quail**, **Ms Ciara Lyons**, **Dr Cathal McCrory**, **Minister James Reilly**, **Professor Richard Layte**.

Launch of the Growing Up in Ireland Report

The Growing Up in Ireland report, Maternal Health Behaviours and Child Growth in Infancy, by Richard Layte and Cathal McCrory, was launched in January 2015 by Dr James Reilly T.D., Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The report showed that the prenatal and early life environment that a child experiences has a profound influence on their health in infancy and subsequent pattern of physical and mental development.

EECERA
26TH CONFERENCE

early childhood ireland

EECERA
European Early Childhood Education Research Association

Conference of the
European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA)
Organised in partnership with Early Childhood Ireland

Event: 26th EECERA conference
Chair: Dr Colette Gray
Theme: Happiness, Relationships, Emotion and Deep Level Learning
Venue: Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
Dates: 31st August – 3rd September 2016

EECERA's annual research Conference is the largest early childhood research conference in Europe, attracting 1000 researchers, policy makers and educators from all over the world.

Keynote speakers

Leon Feinstein, Director of Evidence, Early Intervention Foundation and Chief Analyst, Implementation Unit at the Cabinet Office, UK

Alison Gopnik, Cognitive Scientist and Professor of Psychology and Philosophy at the University of California, Berkley, USA

Hirokazu Yoshikaw, Courtney Sale Ross Professor of Globalisation and Education and NYU Professor, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development.

Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment will represent Ireland on the podium. Anne has just returned from a year spent as a Research Fellow at the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, at ACU Brisbane, where she focused on assessment and teacher identity.

These prestigious speakers, combined with the contributions of over 800 researchers in the conference symposia, promise to make the EECERA 2016 conference in Dublin an occasion not to be missed. For more information visit the website at http://www.eecera2016.org/. Registration will commence in January 2016.

Important Dates
9th March: Final date for submission of abstracts and proposals
9th May: Formal confirmation of acceptance of papers
14th July: Final date for cancellation with refund minus handling charges for registration

chapter 2 | **Primary**

Chapter 2 **Contents**

Primary Education in Ireland: Evolution and impact over the course of the year

By **Pairic Clerkin**

Principal at St. Patrick's Primary School, Castleknock, Dublin 15, and Member of the board of directors of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)

Centre for School Leadership established

One of the more positive developments in 2015 has been the increased investment in school leadership by the Department of Education & Skills. The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) was formally opened in April and it was encouraging to hear the Minister for Education & Skills Jan O' Sullivan welcoming its establishment for an initial 3-year pilot period with an outlay of €3m over that time.

> "The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) was formally opened in April and is intended to become a hub of excellence for school leaders."

The CSL will be operated on a partnership basis between the Department of Education and Skills, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). It is intended to become a hub of excellence for school leaders, and the partnership will have many benefits for the profession in terms of the quality of training programmes, coordination of provision, and increased accessibility. The centre's responsibilities will cover the full scope of leadership development for school leaders, from pre-appointment training and induction of newly appointed principals, to continuing professional development throughout careers.

Literacy and numeracy levels rise

The news in January regarding improvements in literacy and numeracy assessments in primary schools was very welcome. Overall performance in second and sixth class was significantly higher compared with 2009. There were fewer lower-achieving pupils in the system and more higher achievers in both English reading and Mathematics than in 2009.

NEPS publishes guidelines on positive mental health

The guidelines on promoting positive mental health in primary schools were published in January, setting out the important role primary schools play in positive mental health provision to enhance children's life chances. The guidelines, published by the department's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), provide a practical framework for supporting schools in this challenging area and build on the existing good practice already in place in primary schools. They were developed in conjunction with the Health Service Executive (HSE).

> "The guidelines on promoting positive mental health in primary schools were published in January by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and provide a practical framework for supporting schools in this challenging area."

Leadership Award goes to Catherine

The NCLI Leadership Award honours and recognises an individual who demonstrates exceptional leadership qualities. The award recognises those who are driven by a compelling belief that the future can be a better

place, influencing others through their actions and demonstration of personal integrity, honesty and trust , On Friday January 30th. Catherine Farrell was announced as the recipient of the inaugural NCLI Leadership award. The award was presented by Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O Sullivan. Catherine is a recently retired primary school principal of Holy Family Special School in Cootehill, Co Cavan, a national school for pupils aged four to eighteen years which caters for pupils with moderate, severe and profound learning disabilities and for pupils with autism.

> "Catherine Farrell was announced as the recipient of the inaugural NCLI Leadership award."

Guide on tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying launched

A guide for primary schools on tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying was launched in February by the Minister for Education & Skills Jan O'Sullivan. Titled *Respect: Creating a Welcoming and Positive School Climate to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying in Primary School*, the guide was developed by the INTO, the INTO LGBT Group, and GLEN. The Respect resource will support the whole primary school community in creating an inclusive and positive school climate, so that all children can flourish to the best of their abilities.

New Inclusion Support Service being developed

Submissions were sought in March in relation to the announcement by Minister Jan O Sullivan of the establishment within the National Council for Special Education of a new Inclusion Support Service to assist schools in supporting children with special educational needs. The service will include the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), and the Visiting Teacher Service for children who are deaf/hard of hearing and for children who are blind/visually impaired (VTSVHI), which to date have been managed by the Department.

Pupil Online Database now operational

The pupil online database (POD) became operational in September and replaces the mandatory requirement for schools to maintain a hard copy of the *Clárleabhar* (register) attendance of pupils. Schools that use an electronic system for recording attendance of pupils will not be required to maintain the leather *Rolla* and *Leabhar Tinrimh Laethúil*. There will be a requirement for all schools to ensure all pupils are counted on POD for grant payment and teacher allocation purposes.

New model for allocation of resource teachers being piloted

The NCSE had recommended that a new allocation model be put in place for the allocation of resource teaching supports based on the profiled needs of each school. However the Dept of Education and Science announced that there would be no change to the way teachers are allocated to schools for children with Special Education needs for 2015/2016. A pilot of the new model for allocating resource teachers to schools is in place since September with approximately 30 primary schools participating. An interim scheme of provision for students with Down Syndrome who are not currently supported in mainstream class settings under the scheme for low incidence was also announced in March. These interim allocations will remain in place until such time as the proposed new model for allocating teaching supports to children with special education needs comes into force.

> "The pupil online database (POD) became operational in September and there will be a requirement for all schools to ensure all pupils are counted on POD for grant payment and teacher allocation purposes."

Droichead: New model recognises teachers as the experts

A number of schools are currently piloting a proposed new model of induction and probation of newly qualified teachers called *Droichead*. The Teaching Council believes

that the people best placed to conduct this process are experienced colleagues who know what is involved in teaching and learning in their school. These fellow professionals are themselves supported through the provision of a range of structures and resources. The pilot will run until 2016 and will then be evaluated. Feedback from the pilot schools will inform the model which will ultimately emerge. The aim of the Teaching Council is to establish a system for the profession that meets the highest standards, addresses the needs of both pupils and teachers and reflects the realities of daily school life. They believe that this will facilitate professionally-led regulation in the interests of the profession and of the public and will also be a major step in building the continuum of teacher education in Ireland.

Report found no significant relationship between school size and quality of teaching

The Review of Small Primary Schools assessed the efficiency, effectiveness and value for money of small schools as currently configured and organised. Small schools for the purpose of the review were defined as 1 and 2 teacher schools, i.e. schools with less than 50 pupils. The review found that the mean per pupil cost of 1-teacher schools was €6,870, 2 teacher €4,833, 3 teacher €3,582 and 4 teacher €3,214. The estimated per pupil operating cost of a 16 teacher school is €3214.

> "The Teaching Council believes that the people best placed to conduct this process [the new model of induction and probation of newly qualified teachers] are experienced colleagues who know what is involved in teaching and learning in their school."

The inspectorate was asked to analyse school-level quality data and to compare the inspection data for small schools with that of schools of 50 or more. The report from the inspectorate found that there is no significant relationship between school size and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in schools. In response to the report the minister announced a reasonable and balanced way to consider the future of small schools. 2, 3 and 4 teacher schools can, should they choose, continue to exist. Realistically though, there has to be an enrolment number below which a 1 teacher school ceases to be viable. Amalgamation, where this is possible without undue travel distance to a school of similar patronage or language, must be actively considered when enrolment falls below the stipulated figure.

> "The Act places an obligation on employers, including schools, to receive a vetting disclosure from the new National Vetting Bureau."

Changes to staffing in small schools were announced in February which will help to sustain a network of required small schools especially in isolated areas. These changes included the reintroduction of lower retention figures at which schools will be able to retain existing teachers. For the 2015/16 school year these will be 19 pupils rather than 20 to retain a second teacher, 53 rather than 56 to retain a third teacher and 83 rather than 86 to retain a fourth teacher. The minister also announced new appointment and retention numbers for a second teacher in isolated schools (more than 8km from the nearest school of the same patronage and language of instruction) of 15 pupils rather than 19.

Vetting disclosure from new Bureau will be mandatory

The Minister for Justice and Equality has commenced the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012. The Act places an obligation on employers, including schools, to receive a vetting disclosure from the new bureau. It will be an offence to employ without doing so. The Department issued preparatory guidelines for Boards of Management for the statutory requirement for Garda Vetting under the National Vetting Bureau Act. Section 12(1)

of the vetting Act will require that a Board of Management must obtain a vetting disclosure from the Bureau before commencing the initial employment of a new employee. Failure to do so will be a criminal offence

Proposed admissions bill seeks to protect newcomers

There has been a relatively long lead-in to the schools admissions bill. In trying to devise alternative approaches to school enrolment the department has looked at such issues as the balance between what might be prescribed and the extent of autonomy that schools should be afforded, how to make the procedures parent friendly and accessible, how to ensure compliance and deal with schools that might wish to circumvent best practice. Enrolment works well for the vast majority of pupils and in the vast majority of schools particularly where oversubscription does not occur. A common theme running through the proposed legislation is that those seeking a place in schools in a locality when they are new to the locality (whether moving within the country for employment or other reasons, being a newcomer to Ireland or an emigrant returning home) should not be disadvantaged by admission policies and practices operated by schools.

"As part of the programme of [1916 centenary] events, pupils in all schools are invited to write a new proclamation to reflect the hopes and aspirations of their generation."

Parent and Learners' Charter underway

The Department has also been working on the preparation of legislation that would require schools to operate a Parent and Learners' Charter in accordance with guidelines published by the Minister. There is likely to be some variation in the content between primary and post primary schools particularly in relation to the direct engagement with students. For example the Charter would not include guidelines for the operation of student councils in primary school but would nonetheless have to provide for primary schools respecting the voice of the child. The overall approach is to shift away from concentrating on reacting to problems only after they have given rise to grievances. Instead the emphasis is on improving the day to day experience students and their parents can expect from schools by setting out in law the principals that schools must apply in their engagement with students and parents.

Óglaigh na hÉireann visit schools

As the calendar year draws to a conclusion and we begin to celebrate the centenary of the 1916 rising, there is great excitement in our Primary Schools with Óglaigh na hÉireann visiting over 3200 schools to distribute a handmade Tricolour and a copy of the Proclamation and read the Proclamation at a school ceremony giving background information on the symbolism of the Tricolour and the etiquette attached to its display and storage. The countrywide project forms part of the State's effort to mark the 1916 centenary. As part of the programme of events, pupils in all schools are invited to write a new proclamation to reflect the hopes and aspirations of their generation. They are also encouraged to research their own family history back 100 years and see what their ancestors were doing around the time of the Rising. The initiative will culminate with a dedicated Proclamation Day in all schools on 15 March next year.

Inequities

As we begin to commemorate this landmark in our history, it is an opportune time for us to address some of the inequities within our education system and, in line with the sentiments of the 1916 proclamation, to take a step towards 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally.'

Children deserve level playing pitch on entry to primary

Ireland, like most developed countries, has a growing gap between those who have and those who haven't. Research tells us that children who live in disadvantaged circumstances will be a full year behind their middle class counterparts in terms of school

readiness by age three, and fifteen months by age five. A second free ECCE year for all children is a necessity and will be a wonderful investment when introduced, allowing our children to enter primary school on a much more level playing pitch.

Teaching Principals doing an unsustainable job

We also need to level the playing pitch for our teaching principals who are doing a job that has simply become unsustainable. They presently have between 14 and 22 days 'release' time from teaching (depending on the number of classroom teachers) to work on all of the tasks and responsibilities of school leadership. Teaching Principals have two roles to fulfill. They have full-time duties as teachers, more often than not teaching in a multi-grade setting. They also have full-time roles as school principals. It could be argued that many Teaching Principals are doing three jobs because they only have part-time administrative support. Teaching principals must be given at least one 'release' day per week just like their colleagues in Northern Ireland.

Middle Management wiped out in many schools

Another inequity in the system is the ongoing moratorium on the filling of middle management posts in schools. The moratorium has disproportionately affected schools with senior staff members who have retired. Many schools have had their entire management team wiped out, with the exception of the post of Deputy Principal. Principals' workload is a well documented issue at this stage, with numerous surveys confirming that the role is unsustainable without an appropriate middle management structure in place. The reality is that the moratorium has had little impact on some schools while others have seen their middle management structure decimated. However, these schools are still expected to engage with new initiatives, ongoing school development planning, school self evaluation and mentoring of new staff members etc.

DEIS? No Chance - A case study of one principal's experiences in a DEIS school in 2015

By **Anne McCluskey**
Principal of Our Lady of the Wayside NS,
a DEIS band one primary school in Dublin 12.

There is a profound and pervasive inequality within education which is underpinned by economic policies and political decisions and can only be addressed at this level. Regardless of intentions, programmes such as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) can serve to obscure, replicate and justify inequalities inherent in education. Despite initial signs of economic recovery, inequality in schools looks set to deepen and extend, reinforced by policy decisions taken or implemented during 2015. This article addresses the challenges faced by one DEIS school in 2015 and the systemic and policy barriers it faces in trying to meet the needs of the community it serves. It sets these challenges in the context of wider scholarship and social commentary on education and equality and argues that moving towards equality, even the lesser and inadequate ambition of equality of opportunity in education, needs a significant policy shift and decisive action on the part of the State.

While access to quality education is an important human right, education on its own will not achieve equality. In a recent social commentary Marsh (2011) argued that '[w]e cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality', and identified as a false belief the idea that 'what causes poverty and economic inequality is lack of education and what will fix these ills is more and better education' (p 13).

DEIS could be seen as premised on the same false reasoning. If we deny or ignore inequalities in the cultural, religious, family, ethnic and above all economic circumstances of children, we offer no opportunities at all, much less equal opportunities. Indeed you could argue that in the absence of a broader targeted initiative to eradicate poverty in all its manifestations, initiatives such as DEIS serve to obscure and reinforce unequal relations rather than eradicate them.

Funding in general for primary education is entirely inadequate, ensuring that schools are dependent on parental and community resources. This, however, is just one inequality which faces pupils in DEIS schools but it is one which has almost brought our small DEIS Band One primary school to its knees. While there has been some differentiation in relation to the application of resource cuts over the recessionary period, as Principal I can document that the only undiminished resources available to us since 2008 are the idealism of the teachers and the receptiveness of the pupils to learning and new ideas.

Since 2008 and the start of the recession, despite having the same number of pupils, we have lost the Resource Teacher for Travellers, an EAL teacher and the significant support of a Visiting teacher for Travellers. We have also lost valuable members of our support staff. We have had to let one cleaner go and we no longer have a caretaker for our large, old building with huge grounds. Staff members have also experienced pay cuts. A large portion of my day is spent on caretaking and maintenance. Utility bills now far exceed post-cut capitation and we have a taste of what many low-income families know too well: to save money, you have to have money. Raising funds to match a grant to properly insulate or repair our school is impossible for this community. Our DEIS grant, intended for

therapeutic and targeted initiatives, is used to cover utilities and supplement the book grant.

Budget cuts have not been spread evenly across the country, society or even schools. An over 85% reduction in resources available for Traveller education, for example, which removed most of the targeted educational support for Travellers, hit our school disproportionately (Harvey, 2013). Moreover, the cuts to schools are just one aspect of the policy response to the economic recession which has consequences for our school. While much media attention has been given to the 'squeezed middle', disadvantaged areas could be described as the 'crushed bottom'. In my experience, welfare cuts have been pervasive and very damaging to communities which serve and are served by DEIS schools. A cut to lone parent allowance implemented in July 2015, will drive many families further into poverty as parents have to make a choice between low-paid part-time employment and welfare. In the absence of quality affordable childcare, they are dependent on welfare and no removal of income will make them less so.

Schools where parents are in full professional employment have significant resources to draw on both in terms of fundraising, voluntary contributions and influential networks – the contrast of course being schools in areas where there is high unemployment and low income households where voluntary contributions cannot be sought and fundraising opportunities are limited.

A significant education 'policy decision' of 2015 went almost unnoticed and certainly unchallenged politically. The Value for Money Review of Small Primary Schools commissioned in 2011 was finally published in February 2015. A comprehensive examination of the costs of small schools in relation to larger schools and of possible alternative models, led to compelling recommendations which took into account the social imperatives relating to rural Ireland but also the need 'to demonstrate as

much equity as possible in the financing of primary expenditure' (DES, 2013, p. 17). These recommendations were immediately rejected by the Government which proceeded with a cut to capitation in all schools in the same school year. This decision was made for political purposes without taking into account educational research, economic considerations, or inequalities between schools.

The 'social capital' gained from attendance at a school with middle class or mixed social classes is also significant and has far-reaching impact on educational outcomes, particularly in urban environments. As McCoy, Quail and Smyth (2014) point out, while both groups experience low income levels, children attending schools in areas of urban disadvantage have access to lower levels of social and cultural resources than their rural counterparts. Significant also is the inequality in 'learning care' available to children i.e. the education, confidence and domestic resources that parents can draw on to support children at school and with homework and literacy (Feeley, 2014).

> "If we deny or ignore inequalities in the cultural, religious, family, ethnic and above all economic circumstances of children, we offer no opportunities at all, much less equal opportunities."

Public and community services are undervalued and neglected and those who are dependent on them can be viewed from a deficit perspective. Community development projects have had their funding cut, leaving very vulnerable families without women's groups, crèches, after-school programmes and drop in centres. Services relating to mental health, speech and language and occupational therapy have been severely cut during the recession and are inaccessible for many children in DEIS schools and disadvantaged areas. As revealed recently in an article in *The Irish Times* (Irish Times, 7/9/15), the capacity of parents in middle class areas to pay for private assessments

of children's special educational needs has contributed to inequalities in the allocation of special needs/low incidence teaching hours, with schools in south Dublin, especially those in middle class areas, enjoying the highest level of support.

While children across all social classes can and do experience crises, there is a high concentration of pupils in DEIS schools living through extreme crises, many of which are associated with long-term unemployment and inter-generational poverty. As Lynch (2014) states, '[I]n these situations, children's energies are devoted to managing their fears and anxieties; they are not devoted to learning' (Lynch, 2014).

As principal of a DEIS Band One school, I would love to offer 'equality of opportunity' to our pupils, but I know that this is unattainable when I see Traveller children arriving to school from appalling living conditions or children with special needs, including emotional and behavioural/mental health difficulties, who cannot access a service. Not only are opportunities in this context inaccessible but obstacles are insurmountable. I want to see our pupils achieving their full social, cultural, intellectual and economic potential. I want to see 'equality of outcome' for them but to achieve this or even the lesser ambition of equality of opportunity, children need at least to have some 'equality of condition'; to come from backgrounds which although diverse in terms of culture, religion or physical and intellectual ability are equal in terms of economic resources, social status and power (Lynch and Baker, 2005). This is far from the case.

So, how are the pupils in our school faring? Very well actually, within the confines of school and according to literacy and numeracy measures. **Write to Read**, a wonderful literacy programme piloted by Dr Eithne Kennedy and St Patrick's College in ours and seven other disadvantaged schools across Dublin, has fostered the development of teacher expertise in literacy and has brought enormous change in engagement and confidence in both reading and writing and even more so in the way children are able to conduct meaningful and sophisticated discussions.

Will this give them an equal opportunity to compete with their better off peers in accessing third level education or jobs or even in achieving at second-level? Unfortunately not, the obstacles to their participation, never mind their outcomes, are bigger than ever as society becomes more socially and economically unequal.

Parental choice is at the cornerstone of educational policy in Ireland. The state, through the DES, funds education, teachers' salaries, materials and overheads. Management, however, is deployed to private patrons, mainly the Catholic church which controls 90% of schools. Parental choice of school, where choice exists, is often as much about social class as patronage and primary schools are following post-primary in becoming more socially polarised. All supplementary but essential funding in schools is drawn from parents' resources. With this embedded in an unequal socio-economic context, education offers real chances to only some students.

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Moving Forward in Primary Mathematics

By **Thérèse Dooley**

Senior Lecturer in Mathematics Education, St. Patrick's College

Primary mathematics in Ireland is at an exciting juncture. A revised mathematics curriculum is being planned, first for children aged 3–8 years and later for senior classes. Two research reports were recently published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to underpin the first phase. (Dooley, Dunphy and Shiel, et al., 2014; Dunphy, Dooley and Shiel, et al., 2014). A central tenet of these reports is that all children can and should engage in deep and meaningful mathematics. The importance of early mathematics is also recognised in the STEM education review that was submitted to the Minister for Education in 2015 (see McCraith's chapter). Here it is acknowledged that if STEM education in Ireland is to be of the highest international quality, it has to receive focused attention across the formal educational system. The NCCA research reports and STEM review both address primary education and provide a strong impetus to reshape mathematics teaching and learning at this level. In this paper I will argue that the aims of these reports can best be achieved if young learners are active participants in their development of mathematical knowledge.

In the current Primary School Mathematics Curriculum (PSMC), it is envisaged that children develop the processes of understanding and recalling, implementing, communicating and expressing, integrating and connecting, and applying and problem-solving as they engage in the five content areas of Number, Shape and Space, Measures, Data and Algebra (Government of Ireland, 1999). These goals correspond with the goals of most international curricula and, indeed, have been reiterated in the above-mentioned NCCA research reports. There is considerable evidence that, in the implementation of this curriculum, certain processes and content areas have received more attention than others.

Some of this evidence is revealed in a number of small-scale studies that have taken place in Ireland, but I will restrict discussion to the findings of national achievement tests in mathematics that were administered to Fourth class children in 2004 and to pupils in Second and Sixth class in 2009 and 2014. While such tests have limitations in terms of the kind of mathematical knowledge that is assessed, they are helpful in pinpointing areas of relative strength and weakness, and in identifying demographic trends. The 2014 National Assessment of English Reading and Mathematics (NAMER) suggest that overall performance in mathematics in Second and Sixth classes was significantly higher in 2014 than in 2009 (Shiel, Kavanagh, and Millar, 2014). In particular, there were fewer pupils performing at lower levels of proficiency.[1]

> "Placing learners' own thinking at the heart of mathematics learning and teaching is central to greater participation in the subject."

While causes for improvement in performance in such tests are multifaceted and therefore difficult to determine, it is pertinent that a literacy and numeracy strategy was launched by the Department of

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1. Proficiency levels are banded according to task complexity.

Education and Skills in 2011 (DES, 2011). In this strategy a range of measures designed to raise standards in literacy and numeracy (seen as spanning the range of mathematical content areas and processes) from pre-school to post-primary levels is outlined. Some actions include longer teacher education courses with more emphasis on teaching literacy and mathematics, increased allocation of teaching time to both areas in schools, an increased focus on formative and summative assessment, and curriculum redevelopment at primary level. Not all of these actions have been implemented – for example, students will not graduate from longer teacher education courses until 2016. At the same time it is widely acknowledged that the teaching of mathematics is receiving more attention in schools than heretofore and this cannot be dismissed as a possible explanatory factor.

While primary pupils' improvement in mathematical performance is promising, there is little reason to be complacent. For example, performance of pupils attending schools designated as disadvantaged (Band 1 and 2) has improved but they still perform less well than pupils attending non-designated schools. Moreover, in Band 1 schools there are still large numbers of pupils performing at the lower proficiency levels. As has been found in other national and international assessments, children do least well on items assessing higher-order thinking processes. It is not surprising therefore the Shiel at al. (2014) are cautious about the improvements found:

> It would be important to ensure that, over the remainder of the life of the National Strategy, the gains observed in this study are maintained and indeed improved on where possible. In doing so, it might be noted again that the scope for further substantial progress is probably greater in mathematics than in reading. For example, as noted above, there seems to be scope for further growth in Problem Solving in mathematics. (p.68)

This further growth can be generated if children engage in mathematical problems where the solutions matter to them. These problems can arise from mathematics itself or from learners' own cultures, interests or experiences. Such an approach helps to engage all learners, including those in a disadvantaged context, in deep and meaningful mathematics. However, it means that the understanding of mathematical problem solving that applies to the primary level has to be unraveled and expanded.

> "Schools, in their negotiation of the redeveloped curricula, should go beyond mathematical content domains and interrogate the nature of mathematics and important goals for their pupils."

While problem solving is commonly thought to be the essence of mathematics, there is not always consensus on what it means (Hiebert et al., 1996). In particular, students apply 'rules of the game' and engage in little sense-making when they encounter the kind of word problems that tend to proliferate mathematics textbooks (Verschaffel, Greer and De Corte, 2000). It is probably for this reason that current literature emphasizes the higher-order thinking processes that are associated with students' engagement with problematic situations, e.g., conjecturing, justifying, generalizing etc. Research demonstrates that if learners regularly engage in higher-order thinking processes in mathematics lessons, many benefits accrue (e.g., Boaler, 2008). Some of these benefits are obvious, for example increased enjoyment and engagement in the subject. Others – such as improved performance in standardized achievement tests, particularly by those who are traditionally denied access to the subject – might come as a surprise.

From a cognitive perspective, it stands to reason that learners have a better understanding of mathematics if they reflect on and justify their thinking. Researchers who adopt a more critical stance believe that the portrayal of mathematics as unquestionable and rational denies many the opportunity to engage with or to be 'good at mathematics' (e.g., Mendick, 2006). They contend

that placing learners' own thinking at the heart of mathematics learning and teaching is central to greater participation in the subject. In this regard, the thrust of recent NCCA research reports cannot be ignored, that is, "while content should be specified [in the redeveloped PSMC] the processes need to be foregrounded because such an approach is consistent with a *participatory* approach to mathematics learning and development" (Dunphy et al., 2014, p.78, own italics). An important implication of this recommendation is that children's active and explicit engagement with mathematical 'talk' or discourse is a prominent feature of mathematics lessons.

There is little doubt that the teaching of mathematics in which processes and participation are emphasized is complex. It requires teachers to have 'a profound understanding of fundamental mathematics' (Ma, 1999). It means that schools, in their negotiation of the redeveloped curricula, should go beyond mathematical content domains and interrogate the nature of mathematics and important goals for their pupils. This can only be done if there is honest engagement by teachers and school leaders with the local community so that they come to an understanding of children's everyday experience and how it can be used as a basis for learning. It also requires that society at large debate what it means to 'do' mathematics so that any urge to return to an emphasis on procedures is resisted. Finally, the multi-tiered response outlined here, while challenging, must go beyond rhetoric so that all primary pupils have the opportunity to engage with and be empowered by rich mathematical thinking.

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Transforming Learning in 2015 - My Digital Journey

By **Peter Roche**

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Introduction

The world in which today's young citizens are growing up is radically different from that of their teachers. Students today have never known a world without YouTube, Facebook, Wi-Fi, iPods or broadband – all of which were either not invented or not mainstream fifteen years ago. Digital technologies have created a smaller and more connected world and transformed the way we live and work.

What skills and knowledge will be needed by today's Junior Infants to prepare them to meet the challenges of this ever-changing connected world? How can teachers prepare their students to face unknown future challenges?

With the launch of the Digital Strategy for Schools in October 2015, questions relating to the role of digital technologies in education are at the forefront of policy. How will Irish teachers respond?

This article charts the journey which I took as a teacher in relation to how I used and conceptualised digital technologies as part of my classroom practice. It describes the research study which I undertook as part of a master's programme and suggests that digital technologies themselves will not transform learning. Teachers need to bring their deep pedagogical knowledge to bear on how they use technology if it is to fulfil its transformative promise.

International and national policy documents and research identify key skills such as communication, collaboration, problem solving, critical and creative thinking and reasoning as critical skills for the 21st century. These skills are not new and many of them are referenced in our primary school curriculum. However, the Department of Education & Skills (DES) acknowledges that teachers have not been adequately "supported in using ICT to teach (these) key 21st century skills" (O Foghlu, 2015, p. 10). Therefore it is no surprise that, as indicated in the 2013 ICT Census, the vast majority of teachers tend to use digital technologies to support traditional methods of teaching (Cosgrove, Butler, Leahy & Shiel, 2015). I was once that teacher.

ICT in a 'traditional' learning environment

I have always had a keen interest in all things technical. After introducing Interactive whiteboards to the school in 2006, I spent long hours making elaborate flipcharts and developed a great range of digital resources to aid my teaching. The children were able to come up to the interactive whiteboard and use a character to eat a 'quarter of a pizza'. I could close the door of my digital fridge and challenge the children to remember (*as Gaeilge*) what was inside. I was using technology almost exclusively as a presentation tool and a tool for planning, mirroring what is common practise among the vast majority of teachers (Cosgrove et al., 2015). Despite the affordances offered by technology, my pedagogical practices had not in essence changed.

The challenge for me was not just about becoming digitally literate but to consider how to use technologies as tools to transform learning. As the Digital Strategy for Schools outlines, while technical competence and confidence is important, there needs to be a strong focus on pedagogic practice and on deepening personal understandings of

the knowledge and 21st century skills that students need to develop (Cosgrove et al., 2015). My journey to understand this transformational shift began when I signed up for a Masters of Education with a digital learning specialism at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Digital Tools and Learning Transformation

In the first year, my assumptions and beliefs about learning, teaching and the use of digital technologies were challenged as I engaged with a range of theoretical frameworks and used a broad palette of digital tools. I began to develop a different perspective of what being digital in learning could mean. In early summer of 2012, I had to decide on an area of focus for my dissertation. The School Self-Evaluation Process was in full swing in our school and we had identified a number of areas of potential weakness in Mathematics: problem solving, 2-D shapes and estimation. I decided to focus on 2-D shapes as I felt it was an area that I was guilty of neglecting. I had honestly never considered it to be an area of any significance but I soon found out how wrong I was!

Rapid technological developments have fuelled advancements in areas such as computer animation, modern architecture, robotics and medical imaging. These are areas where knowledge of geometrical ideas (shape and space) is essential (Van de Walle, Karp & Bay-Williams, 2010). However the importance of shape and space is not a recent phenomenon; geometry has long been considered by mathematicians to be a central pillar of Mathematics, with some considering it to be the most important (Jones & Mooney, 2004). In particular, 2-D shapes provide the building blocks for later geometric learning and are therefore a good starting point for the development of reasoning and understanding of shape and space generally.

Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprisingly considering the lack of professional development teachers experience in this area, the quality of geometrical learning experiences afforded to primary school students is insufficient (Clements & Sarama, 2011; Van de Walle et al., 2010). Most students leave primary school operating at a visual (level '0') geometric reasoning level, the lowest level on the Van Hiele scale. Van de Walle et al. (2010) consider it to be critically important for students to reach level '2' (the 'informal deductive' level) before leaving primary school in order to be prepared for more advanced geometrical ideas and concepts later.

The Van Hiele scale is a hierarchical model that seeks to explain the progression in geometric thinking. There are five levels but only three are considered relevant to primary education (Van de Walle et al., 2010). At a visual level (level '0') students regard shapes as a whole. In other words triangle A is a triangle because it 'looks like a triangle' whereas triangle B may not be classed as such.
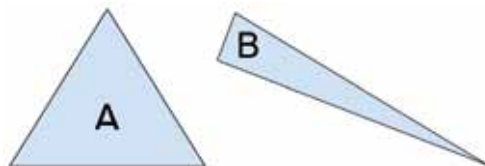
Students at Level 1 are able to characterise shapes according to their properties. They may sort a group of shapes together because they all have four straight sides. At level 2 children can understand and construct definitions of shapes. For example, a child may say a square is a rhombus as it has all four sides equal in length (Frobisher et al., 2007).

So why is it that very few of our students move beyond reasoning at a visual level? There are multiple possible answers to this. School textbooks, workbooks and posters tend to only print the standard prototypical image of the shape – meaning the only pentagon a child may ever see looks like this:

These shapes, however, are also pentagons:

Also school curricula and textbooks tend to over-emphasise the learning of geometric terminology and the naming of shapes rather than emphasising reasoning in geometric contexts. Additionally, exploring 2-D shapes is quite hard to do in traditional pen and paper environments. However, digital tools have enabled new ways of exploring and considering 2-D shapes.

Dynamic Geometric Software (DGS)

DGS are digital tools that allow the children to manipulate and interact with 2-D shapes. Forsythe (2007) explains DGS, and its potential advantages, through an example using triangles. A triangle printed on paper is static – it has three line segments of fixed length, with fixed angles between them and a fixed position on the page, "it is one example of a triangle among an infinity of triangles" (p. 31). However, a triangle constructed using DGS will not be a static triangle, it can be manipulated to make any desired triangle that fits on the screen. In other words, DGS allows you to explore 2-D shapes in ways that are simply impossible to replicate in traditional pen and paper environments. The Shape Makers that my class and I used during my research project, allow the user to create and manipulate shapes within particular classes. We made the pentagons in the example above in a matter of seconds by manipulating the alphabetically labelled control points. Colin and Alex made the quadrilaterals below by taking screenshots of shapes made by the quadrilateral makers.
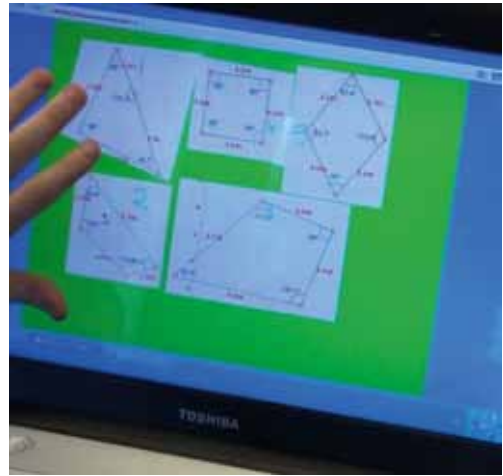
However these tools alone do not develop geometric understandings. Digital tools need to be used to explore purposeful, engaging problems that encourage deep reflection on the manipulations made with the Shape Makers. The challenges that I set for my students were adapted from a series of geometric lessons designed by Michael Battista (1998). The initial problems were designed to encourage the children to consider shapes with regard to their properties (level 1 thinking) rather than on an overall visual level.

"I was using technology almost exclusively as a presentation tool and a tool for planning, mirroring what is common practise among the vast majority of teachers (Cosgrove et al., 2015). Despite the affordances offered by technology, my pedagogical practices had not in essence changed."

1. Tell me which shape makers could make the quadrilaterals below.
Explain your prediction, then check it to make sure (if you can!)

i) Shape Maker	Prediction		Explain your prediction	Check	
Quadrilateral	YES	NO		YES	NO
Trapezium	YES	NO		YES	NO
Kite	YES	NO		YES	NO
Parallelogram	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rhombus	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rectangle	YES	NO		YES	NO
Square	YES	NO		YES	NO
ii) Shape Maker	Prediction		Explain your prediction	Check	
Quadrilateral	YES	NO		YES	NO
Trapezium	YES	NO		YES	NO
Kite	YES	NO		YES	NO
Parallelogram	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rhombus	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rectangle	YES	NO		YES	NO

iii) Shape Maker	Prediction		Explain your prediction	Check	
Quadrilateral	YES	NO		YES	NO
Trapezium	YES	NO		YES	NO
Kite	YES	NO		YES	NO
Parallelogram	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rhombus	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rectangle	YES	NO		YES	NO
Square	YES	NO		YES	NO
iv) Shape Maker	Prediction		Explain your prediction	Check	
Quadrilateral	YES	NO		YES	NO
Trapezium	YES	NO		YES	NO
Kite	YES	NO		YES	NO
Parallelogram	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rhombus	YES	NO		YES	NO
Rectangle	YES	NO		YES	NO
Square	YES	NO		YES	NO

This is an example of an activity that I designed for the children to explore:

For this challenge the children in pairs were tasked with predicting whether each of the seven quadrilateral makers could make each of the four shapes listed above. They were asked to explain their prediction and then to check their predictions using the Shape Makers.

The prediction exercise pushed the children to consider the properties of each class of quadrilateral. Can the square maker make Shape 1? If so, why? If not, what is it about the square maker that prevents this? The discussion between partners is a vital component in that it gives the children a vehicle for externalising their internal thoughts and for refining their mental models through debate and discussion. The act of checking their predictions allowed the children to potentially challenge their previously held beliefs about the quadrilateral under consideration. In addition to developing this reasoning ability, these activities fostered the development of other key 21st century skills such as collaboration and communication with their peers and critical thinking.

"The message for teachers, designers of CPD and policy-makers is simple. Digital tools do not transform learning - teachers transform learning, teachers who have a deep knowledge of a range of pedagogic practises, a deep understanding of the knowledge and skills they wish their students to develop, and the confidence to use a broad palette of digital tools."

a) **Predict** whether or not the Shape Maker can make **EACH** quadrilateral describe in 1-6.

b) **Check** your predictions with the interactive quadrilateral makers, their angles measure and the ActivInspire ruler (if required).

Circle your answers. If a shape maker CANNOT make one of the described quadrilaterals, explain why not.

1. A quadrilateral with side lengths 20, 30, 40, 50.
2. A quadrilateral with side lengths 30, 30, 50, 50.
3. A quadrilateral with all angles different.
4. A quadrilateral with angles, 45°, 135°, 45°, 135°.
5. A quadrilateral with two pairs of sides parallel.
6. A quadrilateral with *at least* one line of symmetry.

Can this Shape Maker	Make this shape?	I predict:		I found:		I found that this Shape Maker will NOT make this shape because:
Square Maker	1	Y	(N)	Y	(N)	Because in a square all side dien
	2	Y	(N)	Y	(N)	Because all sides are eqaul.
	3	Y	(N)	Y	(N)	No! coz all angles are 90° in a
	4	Y	(N)	Y	(N)	No! coz all angles are 90°
	5	(Y)	N	(Y)	N	Yes! coz a Squares equal sides
	6	(Y)	N	(Y)	N	Yes! coz all the side are the

are di same

In a square

in a square

the same in a square

Can this Shape Maker	Make this shape?	I predict:		I found:		I found that this Shape Maker will NOT make this shape because:
Rectangle Maker	1	Y	(N)	Y	(N)	No, because the opp sides are not
	2	(Y)	N	(Y)	N	Yes, because all the sides

don't have to be equal

Figure 17: Part of Ivan & Eve's 'Predict and check' sheet.

In the subsequent quadrilateral activity you can see from Ivan and Eve's answers that they have focussed on the properties of the shapes and not the overall visual image.

Later learning activities that I designed encouraged the children to begin to use deduction, a level 2 reasoning skill. For example, in the 'Mystery of the Polygon Flats' the children had to use their knowledge of the shapes that each shape maker could make, in conjunction with the clues, to 'prove' which shape maker committed the murder!

Names_____

The Mystery of the Polygon Flats 2

Famous detective Sherlock Holmes is in the two dimensional town of Polygon Flats investigating a theft in Quadrilateral Mansion! The seven people who live in the mansion are listed below. These people can change their shape and size but only to a shape that can be made by their Shape Maker.

Our possible culprits are:

Sally Square (played by the Square Maker) * Rectangle Rick (played by the Rectangle Maker)
Karen Kite (played by the Kite Maker) * Parallelogram Paul (played by the Parallelogram Maker)
Trapezium Tracy (played by the Trapezium Maker) * Rob Rhombus (played by the Rhombus Maker)
Quentin Quadrilateral (played by the Quadrilateral Maker)

When the theft occurred, the people in the mansion looked as follows in the mansion's security cameras. Examine the evidence, including the camera pictures and clue below and figure out who committed the theft.

Parlor   Study   Den

Library   Living Room   Game Room
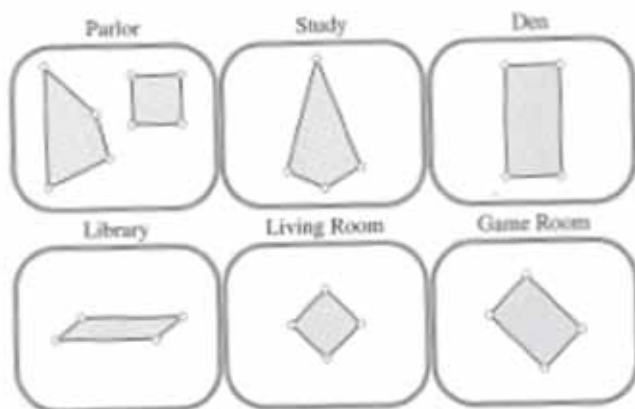
Clues: 1. The theft occurred in the library.
2. The thief sometimes has four unequal sides.

Who is the thief? _____

Write an argument that proves "beyond a shadow of doubt" that the person you have accused of being the thief is guilty. _____

At the end of their Shape Maker explorations the children used Scratch to programme and create games for younger children in the school to help develop their understandings of 2-D shapes. This challenge was a longer-term one and required the children to engage in:

» extensive planning
» problem-solving, as they sought to overcome difficulties with their Scratch code
» creative thinking, as they sought to design an enjoyable experience for the player
» higher order thinking, as they had to make critical decisions about how to convey important understandings of 2-D shapes whilst making the game fun to play
» deep reflection on their own understandings of 2-D shapes as they decided what was important for the player to know.

…all vitally important 21st Century skills.

Conclusion

At the end of the project the children's reasoning skills had developed significantly, with a majority of children reasoning at level '2' and all but one child moving up at least one level. Digital tools were a critical element in enabling this transition. However, it was only through developing my own understandings of 2-D shapes, and developing my own understandings of how best to design a supportive learning environment, that I was able to make effective use of appropriate digital tools.

The message for teachers, designers of CPD and policy-makers is simple. Digital tools do not transform learning – teachers transform learning, teachers who have a deep knowledge of a range of pedagogic practises, a deep understanding of the knowledge and skills they wish their students to develop, and the confidence to use a broad palette of digital tools.

Shape Maker Links

https://www.mathsisfun.com/geometry/polygons-interactive.html (Polygons)
https://www.mathsisfun.com/geometry/quadrilaterals-interactive.html (Quadrilaterals)
http://www.mathsisfun.com/geometry/triangles-interactive.html (Triangles)

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Traschur scileanna i gCuraclam Teanga 2015

An **Dr Pádraig Ó Duibhir**

Cláraitheoir, Coláiste Phádraig, Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath

Tá Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile (2015) bunaithe ar phrionsabal an chomhtháthaithe. Pléitear san alt seo an chaoi gur féidir scileanna teanga a mhúineadh i mbealach níos éifeachtaí má chaitheann múinteoirí am ag cabhrú leis na páistí na scileanna atá foghlamtha i dteanga amháin a thraschur go teanga eile. Má dhéantar é seo go héifeachtach beidh páistí ag foghlaim an dara teanga agus san am céanna ag foghlaim conas teangacha a fhoghlaim. Cabhróidh sé seo leo an tríú agus an cheathrú teanga a fhoghlaim sa todhchaí.

Tá cúlra teanga na bpáistí in Éirinn tar éis athrú as cuimse ó tháinig Curaclam na Bunscoile (1999) ar an saol. Labhraítear breis in 180 teanga éagsúil in Éirinn agus de réir Dhaonáireamh 2011 bhí 514,068 (11%) duine a labhair teanga nach Béarla nó Gaeilge í sa bhaile (Central Statistics Office, 2012). Fágann sé sin go bhfuil céatadán suntasach páistí i scoileanna na tíre atá ag foghlaim an Bhéarla mar dhara teanga (T2). Cé go mbreathnaítear air seo mar fhadhb go minic, ní mór cuimhneamh go bhfuil acmhainn teanga ag na páistí seo gur chóir leas a bhaint aisti. Chonacthas don Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta (CNCM/NCCA) go raibh gá le hathstruchtúrú a dhéanamh ar an gcuraclam teanga chun freastal ar an réimse ilghnéitheach riachtanas a bhí ann. D'iarr an CNCM orm féin agus ar an Ollamh Jim Cummins, Ollscoil Toronto, coincheap an churaclaim chomhtháite teanga a iniúchadh (Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012).

Ba é Jim Cummins féin a chuir tús le go leor den taighde atá mar bhunús don churaclam comhtháite teanga, obair a thosaigh i scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge i mBaile Átha Cliath sna 70í. Is é an príomhsmaoineamh ba mhaith liom a chur chun cinn san alt seo ná traschur scileanna ó theanga go teanga atá bunaithe ar choincheap an chomhtháthaithe. Leag Curaclam na Bunscoile (1999) béim ar eispéireas foghlama comhtháite a sholáthar do pháistí. Ba é a bhí mar bhonn dó seo ná: "tugann an comhtháthú léargas níos leithne agus níos saibhre dóibh ar a gcuid foghlama, leagann sé béim ar an gcomhcheangal atá idir eolas agus idéanna agus atreisíonn sé an próiseas foghlama" (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Baineann an coincheap seo le foghlaim teanga freisin dar liom agus le comhtháthú trasna teangacha ach go háirithe.

> "An impleacht atá ann ó thaobh an teagaisc de ná gur féidir leis an bpróiseas foghlama a bheith níos éifeachtaí má chaitheann an múinteoir roinnt ama ag múineadh le haghaidh traschuir scileanna ó theanga amháin go teanga eile seachas breathnú ar an dá theanga astu féin."

Foghlaimíonn páistí T2 a bheag nó a mhór ar an gcaoi chéanna ar shealbhaigh siad a gcéad teanga (T1), trí idirghníomhú le daoine eile ina dtimpeallacht chun riachtanas éigin cumarsáide a shásamh. De bhrí go bhfuil páistí in ann teanga amháin a labhairt, bíonn tionchar aige sin ar fhoghlaim teangacha eile ina dhiaidh sin (Pinter, 2011). Is féidir le gnéithe dromchlacha na T1 ar nós fuaimniú agus comhréir cur isteach

ar labhairt an T2. Léiríonn an fhianaise ón taighde dúinn, áfach, go bhfuil na buntáistí a bhaineann le traschur scileanna ón T1 i bhfad níos láidre ná aon tionchar ón T1. Tá go leor cosúlachtaí idir litreacha agus fóinéimí na Gaeilge agus cinn an Bhéarla mar shampla. Má thugtar deis do pháistí athmhachnamh a dhéanamh ar na difríochtaí agus na cosúlachtaí seo agus iad ag foghlaim na Gaeilge (nó Béarla) mar T2, faigheann siad tuiscint níos fearr ar struchtúr an T1. Léiríodh go ndéanann páistí comparáidí iad féin gan spreagadh ón múinteoir agus iad ag foghlaim dhá theanga nó níos mó. Léiríonn an taighde, áfach, go mbainfidh siad níos mó tairbhe as an bpróiseas seo má tharraingíonn múinteoirí a n-aird ar an gcaoi a n-oibríonn na teangacha éagsúla. Tugtar eolas meiteatheangeolaíoch air seo (Cummins, 1978).

> "Ar an mbealach seo ní hamháin go mbeidh páistí ag foghlaim na Gaeilge ach beidh siad ag foghlaim na slí le teangacha a fhoghlaim agus beidh an próiseas níos éifeachtaí dá bharr."

Réimse eile ina bhfuil fianaise láidir do ghaoil trastheanga is ea na gnéithe litearthachta de theanga pháistí. Sampla de na gnéithe seo is ea léamhthuiscint agus eolas ar stór focal. Léiríonn taighde atá á dhéanamh le dhá scór bliain anuas go mbíonn páistí ag forbairt buninniúlachta de réir mar a bhíonn siad ag forbairt scileanna litearthachta sa Bhéarla nó sa Ghaeilge.
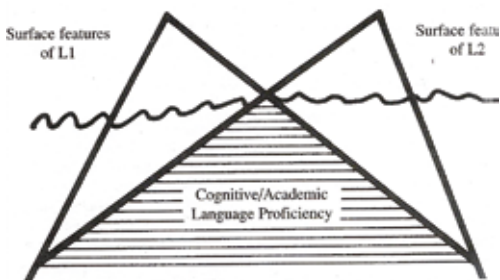
Cuireann an bhuninniúlacht choiteann seo ar chumas páistí eolas coincheapúil, gnéithe teangeolaíochta ar leith agus straitéisí

foghlama a thraschur ó theanga amháin go teanga eile. Má fhoghlaimíonn an páiste a labhraíonn Polainnis sa bhaile conas léamh as Béarla ar dtús ar scoil, beidh a lán scileanna foghlama aige gur féidir leis a thraschur chuig léamh agus scríobh na Polainnise ar ball. Ar an gcaoi chéanna, má fhoghlaimíonn an páiste Polannach an coincheap '5' sa Pholainnis, ní gá dó/di an coincheap a athfhoghlaim chun é a aistriú go Béarla. Ní gá ach lipéad nua a fhoghlaim.

An impleacht atá ann ó thaobh an teagaisc de ná gur féidir leis an bpróiseas foghlama a bheith níos éifeachtaí má chaitheann an múinteoir roinnt ama ag múineadh le haghaidh traschuir scileanna ó theanga amháin go teanga eile seachas breathnú ar an dá theanga astu féin. Beidh gá leanúint ar aghaidh ag múineadh na Gaeilge mar T2 d'fhormhór na bpáistí bunscoile. Ar leibhéal dromchla, sílfidh na páiste go bhfuil na focail agus an fuaimniú an-difriúil. Ar leibhéal níos doimhne, áfach, beidh eolas coincheapúil, straitéisí foghlama agus eolas ar chóras fuaimeanna á bhforbairt ag na páistí agus is féidir iad seo a aistriú go teangacha eile. Beidh béim ar na scileanna éisteachta agus labhartha ar dtús agus is beag den obair seo gur féidir a thraschur ón mBéarla nó ó theanga eile. De réir mar a fhoghlaimíonn páistí na scileanna scríbhneoireachta agus léitheoireachta, beidh níos mó deiseanna ag múinteoirí cur ar chumas na bpáistí comparáid a dhéanamh idir na cosúlachtaí agus difríochtaí idir an Ghaeilge agus a dteanga bhaile. Má mhúintear scileanna cluastuisceana do pháistí i nGaeilge, beidh siad in ann na scileanna sin a úsáid i bhfoghlaim teangacha eile. Sampla eile is ea scileanna scríbhneoireachta, má fhoghlaimíonn páiste conas litir a leagan amach agus a scríobh i mBéarla ar dtús, beidh sé/sí in ann an t-eolas sin a úsáid chun litir a scríobh as Gaeilge nuair a bheidh go leor foclóra agus frásaí foghlama acu.

Toisc gurb í foghlaim na Gaeilge an chéad taithí a bheidh ag formhór pháistí na tíre T2 a fhoghlaim i suíomh teagaisc, tá sé tábhachtach go dtarraingeodh an múinteoir aird na bpáistí ar straitéisí foghlama teanga a bheidh na páistí in ann a chur i bhfeidhm

agus iad ag foghlaim teangacha eile ar ball. Ar an mbealach seo ní hamháin go mbeidh páistí ag foghlaim na Gaeilge ach beidh siad ag foghlaim na slí le teangacha a fhoghlaim agus beidh an próiseas níos éifeachtaí dá bharr. Is féidir an próiseas seo a éascú don mhúinteoir trí naisc agus crostagairtí idir teangacha a bheith i gcuraclaim theanga faoi mar atá déanta i gCuraclam Teanga na Bunscoile (An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Cura‑claim agus Measúnachta, 2015)

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Religious Education in Irish Primary Schools

By **Áine Hyland**
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Since the foundation of the primary school system 180 years ago, religious education (RE) has played a central role in primary schooling in Ireland. The current (1965 edition) Rules for National Schools state (Rule 68):

"Of all parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important …. Religious instruction is …. a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school".

Although the Rules require that all schools provide a programme of 'religious instruction', the Department of Education and Skills does not prescribe the RE curriculum, which is the responsibility of the school Patron (usually the Bishop). Government guidelines suggest that 30 minutes a day, or two and a half hours per week, should be spent on RE.

In schools under Catholic patronage (90% of all primary schools), RE includes faith formation and preparation for the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation. It takes place within school hours and is taught by the classroom teacher. The Catholic RE curriculum is called the *Alive-O* programme (shortly to be replaced by the *Grow in Love* programme), with a series of textbooks and workbooks for each year, a handbook for teachers and resource materials.

In schools under Protestant patronage (about 5% of schools), a general Christian-based RE syllabus is taught and faith formation is provided in Sunday schools organised by the different Protestant churches.

The RE programme for Protestant schools is called *Follow Me* and includes a full colour pupil's text and workbook, a detailed teacher's book for each class and other resource materials.

In Educate Together schools (about 75 schools or less than 2%), a common Ethical Curriculum called *Learn Together*, intended for children of all religions and none, is taught by classroom teachers within schools hours. The programme has four strands – moral and spiritual; equality and justice; belief systems; and ethics and environment. In Educate Together schools, 'faith formation' is regarded as a matter for parents. Groups of parents who wish to arrange for such classes, outside school hours, are facilitated to do so by the school's Board of Management.

In the two schools under Islamic patronage, 50 minutes per day are timetabled for teaching Arabic, the Qur'an and RE to all classes. In addition, pupils from third to sixth classes attend daily prayer in the Mosque and senior pupils also attend Friday Jumah prayer.

In the past three years, in response to the increase in child population in some areas, the State has set up a new type of primary school known as a 'Community National School'. There are currently about ten such schools in the country, under the direct patronage of the Department of Education and Skills. It is intended that these schools will eventually fall under the patronage of local educational authorities.

The RE curriculum currently being developed on a pilot basis in these schools is called *Goodness Me, Goodness You*. The Catholic Bishops have insisted that faith formation classes be made available for Catholic children in these new schools and in 2008 a previous Minister for Education committed the government to this policy. In spite of concerns, expressed by some groups, that separating Catholic children for RE dilutes the inclusive ethos of the schools and in particular might be seen as "the segregation of native white Catholic children from non-white newcomers", the policy still remains.

Under the current pilot programme, in order to provide faith formation classes for Catholic children, pupils are divided for some of the school year into four separate RE groups: (1) Catholics, (2) 'Other Christians', (3) Muslims, (4) Hindus, Buddhists, Humanists, Atheists and Others. Unsurprisingly, this proposed RE programme aroused public controversy when the details became known and the discussion on the form of RE to be provided in these new schools continues.

As the overwhelming majority of Irish schools are under Catholic control and there is usually only one local primary school, many parents, Catholic or not, have no choice but to send their children to Catholic schools. While in theory children may 'opt out' of RE classes at their parents' request, schools can be unwilling or unable to accommodate such requests. Reports such as that of the Irish Human Rights Commission (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011) and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism have called for the Rules for National Schools and school policies and practices to be amended to ensure that schools comply with "the human rights requirements of national and international law" in relation to freedom of conscience. They have also called for State action to provide a greater diversity of schooling options at primary level.

A new "Education about Religious Beliefs" programme is currently being developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Consultation about this programme is due to commence shortly. Hopefully this new programme will address the lacuna in relation to an inclusive RE curriculum which currently exists in Irish primary schools.

Editorial Comment

The recent case in Castletroy College, in which the Board of Management allowed a first year student to opt out of religious education course, calls into question the future of religious education in Irish schools. If religion as a subject were to go the way of Latin in the 1970's, it would be deeply damaging to society.

In a world where religious intolerance and hatred between sects within the Islamic faith is reaping havoc throughout the middle-east, it has never been more important to ensure that our children understand the phenomenon of religion within human society and its expression in various belief systems and codes of morality.

The issue of faith formation is a totally different matter. There is no doubt that many teachers are deeply uncomfortable dealing with issues of faith formation, because of their own religious beliefs or lack of them. Children are perceptive and instantly will pick up when a teacher is simply going through the motions.

Would the Churches not be in a far healthier state if parents who wanted their children raised within a particular faith tradition had to put in place structures, such as Sunday school in parish halls during Mass times, through which they could transmit their faith and the belief systems associated with it to the children in their community. It would challenge parents to stand up and profess their faith. We would end up with far fewer children taking sacraments, but those who did would form the bedrock of the future of their faith tradition.

The Induction and Probation of Newly Qualified Teachers through the Droichead Pilot Programme: The experience of one urban school

By **Michelle Keane**

Principal of St. Patrick's Senior National School, Skerries, Co. Dublin

This article presents a case study of one school's experience of participating in the Droichead Pilot Programme. It describes the process from the school's perspective and examines the role of the principal in that process. The case study offers a perspective on both the internal and external models of school-based induction which Droichead is piloting, and identifies strengths and challenges in the process. Finally, it suggests some key recommendations, based on experience, which might inform the process in the future.

While historically, the Department of Education Inspectorate has been responsible for the probationary process for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in Ireland, since 2012 the Teaching Council has assumed its statutory responsibility for the induction and probation of new entrants to the profession, as laid out in the Teaching Council Act, 2001, and is currently piloting Droichead as its model of induction and probation in Irish schools. The Droichead Pilot Programme, which is set to run until 2016, offers a model of school-based induction and probation which provides for the establishment of a Professional Support Team (PST) in the NQT's school with the remit to provide mentoring and support to new teachers and to recommend to the Teaching Council that the Droichead condition be removed from the teacher's registration, once the NQT has fulfilled the necessary criteria (The Teaching Council, 2013).

Our school took part in the Droichead pilot process during the school year 2014/15 and this case study outlines our experience of that process. As a principal, I chose to participate in the process in order to experience it and to contribute to the project while still at pilot stage. As I had been trained as a mentor under the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), when teaching in a previous school, I felt I had sufficient knowledge and skills to undertake the project.

> "As a principal, I chose to participate in the process in order to experience it and to contribute to the project while still at pilot stage. I had been trained as a mentor in a previous school so I felt I had sufficient knowledge and skills to undertake the project."

In order to provide context to this account I will outline our school's profile for the year in which we participated in the project. I am principal of a large urban school in North County Dublin. The school has 347 pupils. Our school is a senior national school (3rd-6th classes). The school has 13 mainstream teachers, 5 special education needs teachers and 5.5 special needs assistants. The school also benefits from a full time secretary (school hours) and a part time caretaker. On a management level during the 2014/15 school year our school had a Principal and a Deputy Principal at senior management level and 3 special duties post holders. Unfortunately, in recent years the school had lost 1 Assistant Principal post and 3 special duties post holders during the moratorium applied to replacement posts. As Principal, I was very conscious of this when undertaking a new project.

When I outlined to the Management Board of the school why I felt it was important to

participate, the Board gave full approval both to the process and to the release of teaching staff for training and updating purposes to the NIPT. The Board were reassured that appropriate substitution would be provided without incurring costs. The school would participate in the internal model – all members of the Professional Support Team (PST) (a team of experienced teachers which includes the principal and mentors) would be internal to the school. Following Board of Management approval, I spoke to the staff. The teachers were willing to engage with the process as they fully understood the value of being part of the pilot programme.

During the Summer, interviews were held during which candidates were told that the school would be part of the Droichead Pilot Programme. Two teachers were subsequently appointed into fixed term positions which enabled them to participate in the pilot. Both NQTs were in a mainstream setting. The teachers who volunteered to be part of the PST commenced the training with the NIPT with immediate effect. So began the process which involved the provision of support and mentoring for the NQTs, observations of their teaching by members of the PST, and opportunities for NQTs to observe experienced teachers. These opportunities were pre-planned in relation to the content and various methodologies which the NQTs felt would be of benefit to them. As the pilot unfolded, cluster meetings provided opportunities to the PST and the NQTS to share their experiences with teachers from other schools and to benefit from the support of the NIPT and the Inspectorate.

Throughout the process the NQTs met regularly with both trained mentors in terms of planning, record keeping and clarification of policies etc. When new milestones were approaching e.g. preparing for formal parent/teacher meetings, the full PST met with both NQTs. As a team we had agreed that the mentors assigned to each NQT would also observe the other. We felt this gave the process a more official stance.

The mentors also ensured that the NQTs knew that they could approach them with any concern no matter how minor. While this would already have been part of the culture of the school, it made it easier for the NQTs that it was on a more formal basis. The process continued throughout the year. The PST met shortly after Easter and it was the view of all that we were satisfied that both NQTs had met all the criteria necessary to forward the written recommendation to the Teaching Council. Shortly afterwards the NQTs received confirmation that the condition of probation had been removed from their registration with the Teaching Council.

Involvement with the External Model
The situation arose during the first term of the 2014/15 school year, that two schools, (urban and rural) who had opted for the External Model (where the PST includes an external member) required someone to sit on their PST. Following consultation with the NIPT, I agreed to act as the external member. I believed it would add to my experience if I participated in both models.

> "The process involved the provision of support and mentoring for the NQTs, observations of their teaching by members of the PST, and opportunities for NQTs to observe experienced teachers."

The process was very similar to our experience of the internal model. I visited both schools on multiple occasions and met with the PST. I also met with the NQTs and observations were undertaken. The NQTs were observed in both Restricted Recognition and Mainstream settings. Once again both NQTs were deemed to have met the appropriate criteria for probation and the recommendations were forwarded to the Teaching Council. The main benefit, in my view, of the external PST member is that it is undoubtedly a more objective model in the event that an NQT was not deemed to have met the appropriate criteria. On a practical basis however, it involves more organisation as the external member possibly needs Board of Management approval for their

absence from their own school, and timetables/calendars in two schools need to be taken into account when deciding dates.

> It is envisaged during the Droichead process that NQTs would be made aware of any difficulties as they arise, with a view to solving them

Throughout both models the NIPT were extremely supportive. Visits were made to the participating schools and an associate member of the NIPT was always available for advice and support. It was open to a PST to request the assistance of the NIPT if a situation arose in either model where a PST could not agree on a recommendation or sought further advice. It is envisaged during the Droichead process that NQTs would be made aware of any difficulties as they arise, with a view to solving them, so that a concern about a NQT not being probated would not come as a surprise quite late in the process.

The Benefits of the Droichead Pilot
» The staff gets the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue and are involved in educational matters.
» The PST is afforded the opportunity of further professional development
» The principal is kept updated with current educational issues and new initiatives
» While still undergoing what is a rigorous process the NQT feels more relaxed and guided, and consequently undergoes a more comprehensive induction into the profession.

Challenges/Going Forward
» The pilot programme is very much dependent on the goodwill of teachers to participate in the PST.

» The amount of training undertaken needs to be recognised by either the Teaching Council or the DES as a lot of this occurs outside of school hours.
» Consideration needs to be given to the substitution arrangements as it can be difficult finding substitutes as the year progresses.
» The NIPT will need further funding and resources if it is to continue at its current excellent level of professionalism in any future roll-out of the Droichead process.
» Having completed the process in a large school, serious consideration needs to be given to the feasibility and the practicality of the process in small schools where there are class-based principals.
» There is a significant amount of work involved for those who participate on the PST. It would be beneficial to consider this when in-school management is being reviewed by the DES.
» Regional panels should be created from which external members (having received appropriate training) could be selected /could be drawn from.

For the school year 2014/2105, there were 149 schools participating in Droichead, with 279 newly qualified teachers and a comprehensive guide to the process has been made available online (The Teaching Council, 2015). The process is being shaped from the feedback provided by these schools, both from research being conducted by the E.S.R.I. and on an ongoing basis as communicated by NIPT. This case study is offered as constructive feedback on the process with a view to informing its future development.

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Dancing to Life: Reflections on the Experience of the Dance Artist-in-Residence at Maynooth University

By **Triona Stokes**

Dance Residency Coordinator and Lecturer in Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University

Introduction

The European Commission (2009) has recognised the central role of creativity and innovation within education in forming competences needed by young people for 21st century life. The importance of creativity in the life of the whole school community is succinctly captured by Morrissey (2009:110):

> 'Undoubtedly, the cultivation of classroom creativity requires committed, creative teachers. And if these teachers work in schools where there is a culture of creativity, playfulness and collaboration, the potential to enhance children's creativity is further enhanced'.

Arnold (1986) endorses the view that creativity is not the exclusive gift of some, but something which each of us can access and potentially develop. Furthermore, cultural awareness and expression are named as key competences as part of the EU Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (Grayson, 2014:9).

One medium for the development of creative and expressive capacities for student teachers is the opportunity to engage with artists' work as an integral part of their Initial Teacher Education programme. Arts residencies funded by the Arts Council located within Irish Initial Teacher Education provision address this aim, and in so doing, fulfil one of the commitments of the *Arts in Education Charter* (2012:5):

> *'The Arts Council will work with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Department of Education to increase the number of artists' residencies in Colleges of Education'.*

History of the Dance Residency

In the pivotal year of transition to Maynooth University campus, the (then) Froebel College of Education responded to a call from the Arts Council in 2013 to tender for applications to secure arts residencies. The transition from Froebel College of Education to the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University marked an exciting and historical moment in the Irish educational landscape. The prospect of the appointment of an artist-in-residence to the new department would enable enhanced integration of the culture, ethos and tradition of Froebel College of Education within the broad university campus. The residency also presented the opportunity to work in partnership with Kildare Arts Service.

An interim working group to plan for the residency application prioritised the art form of dance, as it was anticipated that student teachers would benefit from additional arts-rich experiences in creative dance, as one half of the Physical Education curricular strand unit of dance. Increased exposure to the art form of dance, and opportunities to work with artists of note would endeavour to build confidence in dance in the emerging teacher. Furthermore, the residency would build upon the foundational skills provided through the existing education course components, and

offer further artistic and aesthetic engagement opportunities for students.

Establishing the Residency

The appointment of a Dance Artist-in-Residence in January 2014 was supported by the formation of a committee comprising Professor Marie McLoughlin Head of Department, Tríona Stokes, Lecturer in Drama in Education, Tony Sweeney, Lecturer in Physical Education, and Laura Thornton, Lecturer in Visual Arts Education. Tenets of the residency were planned to mirror the curricular sub-strands in the areas of creating, performing and appreciating dance. Part of the vision for the residency was that over the course of a term, student teachers electing to partake in a performance project would shadow the dance artist in developing a dance theme or stimulus with their peers and/or primary school pupils. Student teachers could learn experientially the steps and skills demanded by the teaching professional to develop a dance idea from its inception to a sophisticated group performance. In so doing, the student teacher gains a deeper understanding of the Physical Education Curriculum's (1999) Dance strand unit, *Exploration, Creation and Performance of Dance.*

In her first semester in residence, dance artist Lisa Cahill engaged with student groups through introductory workshops provided for each year group. Each semester of the residency, some members of the staff at the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood accepted the invitation to co-plan and co-facilitate B Ed course content with Lisa. Collaborative workshops utilising dance as a stimulus or methodology were co-facilitated through the subject areas of Physical Education, Social Personal and Health Education, Drama, Visual Art and Gaeilge. In addition, a group of Year Four students availed of a series of Dance in Education workshops, which culminated in devising dance for performance. *Your Turn My Turn* on May 2, 2014 featured two performances. *Spoken Dance* artist Deirdre Corry and Lisa Cahill performed in Maynooth University. *Spoken Dance* is an integrated dance company comprising dancers who have, and do not have, a disability. Following this a trio dance was performed by Lisa Cahill with former students Bill Myers and Eoin Kinsella. Following his first live dance performance, Bill stated:

> "*It really has been a journey and it has been great to learn a little about myself and be a bit more positive. Again it's mostly down to Lisa and the breath of fresh air she has brought.*"

Forming Partnerships

Partnership with the Kildare Arts Service has resulted in making contacts with local bodies and schools. This contributes to realising one of the aims of *Points of Alignment: The Report of the Special Committee on the Arts in Education (2008:27):*

> '*Local Partnerships would build on existing relationships or would derive new relationships involving professional artists and arts organisations...*'

Through partnership with Visual Arts in Education Lecturer, Laura Thornton, links have been forged with Kildare-based artists, including visual artists Brian Cregan and Vera McEvoy, who was a guest speaker on the B Ed Y4 Elective, *Creative Textiles: A Sensory Journey through Poems, Prose and Pictures.*

Two of the key objectives of the Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education School Placement Strategic Plan 2015-2017 are to *develop high quality school partnerships* and *to build a range of School Placement support resources* (O' Neill, 2015). The appointment of a Dance Artist in Residence in Maynooth University has furthered the realisation of both of these key objectives. Creative dance resource material devised by Lisa Cahill is uploaded onto the Froebel YouTube site. This can be accessed by student groups as a stimulus for further Dance in Education work. *Dance Surprise* contributed to recent celebrations for Culture Night 2015, which constituted a programme of workshops with Second Class pupils, facilitated by Lisa Cahill in Scoil an Linbh Íosa, Ballycane,

Naas. Lisa will be co-facilitating dance and drama workshops with pupils at St. Raphael's Special School, Celbridge in 2015–2016, in conjunction with Aisling Byrne, Educational Drama Practitioner based at St. John of God's Community Services, Kildare. Performance-based project work in local schools provides unique opportunities for student teachers to engage in personal and collaborative artistic practices with peers and primary school children. Year Four student, Louise Mahon describes her experience of working with the Dance Artist-in-Residence:

> "On the first session of this contemporary dance journey, dancing around the PE Classroom was a highly uncomfortable experience. The long wall of windows seemed to be there only to magnify my feelings of discomfort, as all I could think of was what people looking in would see. Over the course of this journey with Lisa, however, this feeling has entirely changed. Dance has been transformed from something which is done for others to watch, to something which is done to recognise feelings often ignored in day-to-day life. And, as a result of this, the windows in the PE classroom are no longer a clear surface for others to look through, but rather a reflective surface in which I see myself and my inner me reflected back at me" (December, 2014).

Creating Performance

The work of the first year of the Artist-in-Residency programme, 2014, culminated in a performance event at Maynooth University which also featured a solo dance from Dance Artist-in-Residence, Lisa Cahill. A second schools-based project is currently underway in Gaelscoil Uí Fhiaich, Maigh Nuad, which will culminate in a performance at Maynooth University featuring Second Class pupils dancing with student teachers in December 2015. Lisa claims that a well-structured creative dance practice offers participants the freedom to express what is within (Cahill, 2015). She likens this belief to Friedrich Froebel's emphasis on the essential value of play in education, and 'the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling, an expression which his inner life

requires' (Froebel, 1898, in Lilley, 1967:84). Lisa states:

> "I feel very privileged in my role because I have a freedom to play in this 'school', create projects that invite shy, invisible forms become more visible. My attention alert and quiet, as Froebel Department student teachers and staff, and children in partner schools, step forward to express an interest in participating in an educational dance process. I endeavour to receive each person with open-heartedness, care and attention" (Lisa Cahill, Maynooth University Dance Artist-in-Residence, 2015).

Taking Flight constituted a combination of solo dances, ensemble and group work in various groupings and Dance Artists in Residence, Lisa Cahill performed a solo dance. Class teachers Ms. Katie Rafter and Ms. Bríd O' Leary accepted the invitation to work with Lisa Cahill weekly over the first school term. First Class boys from St. Mary's Boys' National School, Moyglare road, Maynooth performed *Circle Play* with Lisa. Fourth Class girls from Presentation Girls' Primary School, Maynooth performed the title dance, *Taking Flight*, a work they had co-created with Lisa. First Class Teacher at St. Mary's Boys' National School Maynooth, Ms. Katie Rafter, said of the programme:

> "The boys have really enjoyed dancing with Lisa each week. They look forward to each session and totally immerse themselves in the dance. It has been a great calming influence on the class. A few of the children who find it difficult to sit still and focus in class were transformed when dancing and it was a great outlet for their energy. In addition to developing the boys' focus and concentration, it has also helped to improve their coordination" (December, 2014).

Conclusion

The Arts Council's artist-in-residency programme at Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood has far exceeded all expectations. Thus far, the residency has assisted the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in 'dancing to life' on Maynooth

University campus. Delivering to each of its stakeholders– student teachers; lecturing staff; partner schools and pupils, the residency has truly allowed for a unique engagement with dance. To conclude, attention is drawn to Fourth Class pupil of Presentation Girls' Primary School, Maynooth, Saoirse Reynold's testimony of her experience of the residency:

'And it was kind of fun because we had to make up our own dance and we weren't told to follow steps, we just made up our own'.

Saoirse highlights the essential element of ownership and co-creation which distinguishes the creative dance process from a more traditional, instructional model:

'Because you get to do it – it's more fun and it's more entertaining. And you just get to have more fun with your friends making up all the dances.'

Congratulations are due to the staff and pupils of Presentation Girls' Primary School, Maynooth and St. Mary's Boys' National School, Moyglare road, Maynooth, and all participating B Ed students; Congratulations to Lisa Cahill, Dance Artist-in-Residence; Sincere thanks to Professor Marie McLoughlin, Tony Sweeney and Laura Thornton; Séamie O' Neill, Head of Education and the staff of Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education; Lucina Russell, Kildare Arts officer, the Kildare Arts Service team and Arts Council researcher Anne Marie Herron. Finally, a note of thanks is extended to the unstinting support of Gaye Tanham, former Head of Department of Young People, Children and Education in the Arts Council, and distinguished contributor to Dance Education in Ireland.

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The European Year for Development and the experiences of development-based teacher placements

By **Fionnuala Flynn**

Project Officer, Global Schools: Primary Education for a Just World

Introduction

The European Year for Development (2015) and significant global events which occurred this year have highlighted the involvement of schools in development education and the strong commitment to such issues that exists in Ireland. One indicator of this commitment is the large number of teachers who volunteer in local communities in the Global South. This article outlines the experience of one teacher and particularly the impact of such experiences on her personal and professional development.

The European Year for Development, 2015, is timely for a number of reasons. Not only is it the first European year dedicated to the external actions of the European Union, but it is also occurring at a time when Development is high on the global political agenda. While conversations around climate change are becoming louder and more urgent, governments have agreed new United Nations (UN) Global Goals. All of this is happening against a backdrop of the largest movement of human beings on our planet since the Second World War – the catalyst for the formation of the UN itself. The scale of the latest refugee crisis has focused attention on the need for an educational as well as a humanitarian and political response.

In Ireland, there is already a palpable interest in development issues, not least among educators, and more specifically primary teachers. The Irish Government, principally through Irish Aid, actively encourages development education in schools and colleges of education. Another indicator of educators' engagement with development issues – and the focus of this article – is the number of teachers engaged in professional or voluntary overseas experiences. The Organisation of Returned Development Workers, Cómhlamh, estimate that 20% of overseas volunteers came from an educational background (McCloughlan, 2013). The INTO directly funded 74 of its members in 2014 to volunteer overseas, while indirectly funding many more through different non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as part of its solidarity fund. At least fifteen organisations, involved in recruiting teachers for short and long term placements overseas adhere to a code of good practice in this regard. (Comhlámh, 2013)

> "Teachers returning from such placements have said that their experiences have contributed significantly to the enhancement of both their personal and professional attributes."

While concerns have been expressed about the underpinning conceptualisations and understandings that are implicit in such programmes (Martin and Griffiths, 2013) teachers returning from these placements have said that their experiences have contributed significantly to the enhancement of both their personal and professional attributes. A survey of teachers who volunteered in development settings in 2012 found that they returned with the view that the placement facilitated the enhancement of their own teaching and learning skills. Among the key skills acquired were personal, such as tolerance and patience, and professional, such as leadership, teamwork, flexibility and adaptability and problem solving (McCloghlan, 2013).

My first opportunity to experience teaching overseas arose when I successfully applied to participate in the Réalt programme in 2008. The Réalt programme is a partnership between colleges of education in Ireland and primary schools and colleges in Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania. The programme recruits, prepares and supports young teachers for 8 week teaching placements in which they live and work in local communities. What I encountered upon my arrival in Arusha, Tanzania was a much different Africa to that which I had been programmed all my life to expect. Ranked number 159 of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index, it is, economically speaking, one of the world's poorest countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Its Gross Domestic Produce (GDP), in US dollars, equals 49.18 billion, in a country of 50.76 million people (The World Bank, 2015b). Despite its poverty and the daily challenges faced by its people, Tanzania proved to be a joyful and inspiring place to live and work..

My time in Tanzania forced me to look at world views, particularly those concerning wealth, from a different perspective, one that has stayed with me and influenced both my personal and professional life. I have been compelled, consequently, to see things from others' perspectives. This is something I have carried with me into my teaching. Unconsciously, I have found myself playing devil's advocate in discussions, encouraging children to question their own opinions and challenge their views and the mainstream views which are so often presented to them through various media, more increasingly social. What has always struck me while teaching is the constructivist nature of children's thinking and opinions. Children are capable of engaging with challenging issues. Their moral thinking and ability to think critically is clearly evident by age nine, and should be encouraged (Oberman et al, 2014).

I feel that the most important thing a teacher can do when working with children is to challenge both themselves and the children to open their minds and look at a situation from a number of viewpoints before coming to a conclusion – something which will prove beneficial not only in their academic learning but also in their personal lives and relationships. This approach can be employed in various ways in a classroom – discussions and debates which facilitate opposing and differing view, examination of texts which support critical literacy, exposure to the many contrasting perspectives on one story, among others.

My time in Tanzania has affected my work explicitly. I have tended to focus a lot of my work, particularly on SESE and English, on global and developmental issues – however, it has been most influential in my "hidden curriculum" and the implicit messages disseminated in the classroom each day. I have found that encouraging open and challenging discussions in a classroom setting has reaped some of the most interesting and creative ideas I have witnessed among children - children who may previously have shown little interest in the topic until confronted with an alternative perspective.

Ultimately, my teaching placement in Tanzania, although not obvious to me at the time, has had a profound effect on my personal and professional life. My own outlook on various global issues has changed. I have been motivated since my initial placement to take part in further volunteer placements, and ultimately to pursue a career in human rights and development education, which has led me to my current work on the Global Schools: Primary Education for a Just World project, based in St. Patrick's College. The project, part funded by the EU and Trócaire, aims to embed Education for Global Citizenship into primary education across ten European countries. It has been initiated in the context of this European Year for Development and its goal of increasing awareness of development issues among European citizens. I hope to use the skills I have learned since my initial placement to foster an interest among primary teachers in global issues, and to work with our various partners to ensure a durable commitment to Education for Global Citizenship and its various methodologies and approaches in Irish primary schools.

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Peer Mediation in an Irish Primary School

By **Maeve Corish**

Principal, Educate Together National School, Donabate, Co Dublin

Introduction

This article describes an Action Research project undertaken by the school principal to examine the impact of a Peer Mediation Programme on a primary school. Peer Mediation is a conflict resolution process, through which students who are trained as mediators help other children to resolve conflicts. This study involved the planning, implementation and evaluation of a peer mediation programme in a primary school with a focus on its general impact on the school, the identification of challenges to its successful implementation and on the participation of children in the process. Sixth class children were trained as peer mediators and then worked with their fellow students to help them to successfully resolve conflicts. The outcomes of this research has informed current practice in the school and influenced policy more broadly within the sector.

Conflict

Conflict is a normal, inevitable part of life (Tyrell, 2002: Stacey and Robinson, 2008). Whether it has a destructive or a constructive influence on our lives depends, not on the conflict itself, but on how we deal with it (Tyrell, 2002). Good communication and dialogue are needed to resolve conflicts before they escalate into large problems (Johnson and Johnson,1995). It is important to understand conflict and to realise that there are often many underlying issues which shape and add weight to a conflict situation. Taking the time to understand the underlying issues and to actively listen to the other person will go a long way towards resolving conflicts (Crum, 1987). Schools can play an important role in teaching pupils the skills they need to fully understand conflict and should encourage pupils to use conflicts as learning opportunities.

> "Peer Mediation is a service run for students, by students and is highly valued by students."

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution can be divided into three main areas – negotiation, arbitration and mediation (Tyrell, 2002). In schools all three methods of conflict resolution are used but most importantly schools should strive to create a positive, supportive climate where conflicts are rare (Cloke 2005). In recent years many schools are basing their behaviour management policies on restorative justice practices which shift the emphasis from managing behaviour towards the importance of nurturing relationships (Hopkins, 2002). Restorative justice is concerned with moving away from traditional punitive methods of dealing with conflict towards finding a way forward that is acceptable to all parties. A number of key values and skills underpin the restorative justice approach, including the creation of an ethos of respect and inclusion, advocating empowerment and emotional articulacy, active listening and the expression of emotion. In this context, Peer Mediation is a conflict resolution process, through which students who are trained as mediators help other children to resolve conflicts.

Skills for resolving conflict

In the school setting, the skills needed for conflict resolution can be taught in discrete SPHE lessons but undoubtedly they are also taught and developed informally, through the school ethos and the philosophy which underpins this. In the context of our school, this ethos is strongly informed by the school's commitment to children's rights as enunciated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992). Peer mediation embodies the principles and spirit of the Convention. Peer mediation recognises the integrity of the child as a full human being, it gives a clear message to children that they are trusted to problem solve and to seek resolutions to real life situations. Peer mediation recognises the child as a citizen and not just as a potential citizen. Following Lundy (2007), it provides them with the space and the voice to fully express themselves and it also shifts the power from the adult to the child, giving them the audience and influence to effect change. Schools need to find ways of ensuring that pupils are given real and meaningful opportunities to participate (Johnny, 2006).

Peer Mediation

Now in 2015 Peer Mediation is a core part of the school's anti-bullying and citizenship practice. Our experience to date is that the Peer Mediation process is valued highly by the students, staff members and parents of the school. The children value the programme because it is a successful method of conflict resolution, many rows and disputes have been resolved through peer mediation in our school. Students now have a choice; they can choose to go to peer mediation or to go to a teacher to help them resolve a dispute. The children themselves particularly value the opportunity to resolve disputes with their peers without fear of punishments or sanctions and without the risk of being labelled as a 'rat' by the other children. The relaxed, easy going atmosphere of peer mediation is attractive to the children. An interesting and important theme that emerged during the research was that the peer mediation process helps the children reflect on their own behaviour.

Mark, one of the disputants, commented that 'I didn't realise until the peer mediation what I was doing to him'. He expanded on this saying:

> ...it gives you a chance to know what you're doing and how or what not to do. With the teachers you just hear orders and you don't really hear what you've done wrong.

Adults, both staff and parents, appreciate the educational value of the programme. Adults particularly value the opportunities peer mediation provides the children to enhance their communication and interpersonal skills. Adults believe it promotes maturity, respect, empathy, decision making and team building. Adults view peer mediation as a great opportunity to develop self-esteem and independence. They value the programme for its potential for lifelong learning.

> I definitely think it helps the children. I think it helps them to deal with situations that arise in their life at the moment and in their future. It helps them to work out problems and to work as part of a team. It helps to develop their social skills (Laura, Special Needs Assistant)

An entry in my own reflective diary in February also supports the fact that peer mediation is valued simply because it works.

> Today two third class girls went for mediation. I met them on their way in and they were visibly upset and I must admit that I felt anxious handing them over to the mediators. About twenty minutes later the mediation was over and the four children were smiling and laughing. I asked if they had worked everything out and if everyone was happy. They were all in agreement. Peer mediation works!'

The peer mediation programme was well received in the school and there was no overt resistance to its implementation. The programme is now running for five years in the school, it has become embedded in school life. Improving awareness of the programme remains a constant challenge.

A small number of research participants expressed a fear that breeches of confidentiality might challenge the success of the programme, however, these fears have not been realised over time. Initially all 6th class children were trained as mediators and every child who opted to work as a mediator was given this opportunity. Over time this practice was changed and now a small group of eight mediators are selected. Mediators who demonstrate the skills of empathy and kindness are selected.

"Adults believe it promotes maturity, respect, empathy, decision making and team building. Adults view peer mediation as a great opportunity to develop self-esteem and independence. They value the programme for its potential for lifelong learning."

While the programme generally enhanced the voice of students in the school it was found to be particularly empowering for the mediators themselves. It is a service run for students by students and is highly valued by the students. The main reason the programme is valued by the children themselves is simply because it involves children sorting out problems without adult intervention, children also value its adherence to restorative justice principles with emphasis on resolving differences rather than exacting punishments. While the programme initially was introduced into the school by adults, it provides opportunities for children to develop the skills and dispositions associated with active citizenship. The adults recognise that the peer mediation programme heralds a shift in power from the adults towards the children in the school. The ethos of the school supports the enhancement of student participation and is fundamental to its development.

It is hoped that the positive findings of this study will ensure the continuation of the peer mediation programme in the school and will help to convince other educators of the potential that peer mediation has, both as a successful method of conflict resolution, and in enhancing children's participation and empowerment.

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Commemorating 1916 in Irish Primary Schools: Looking back and looking forward

By **Dr Fionnuala Waldron**

Cregan Professor of Education at St Patrick's College, DCU

In recent decades, the politics of commemoration have been subjected to increased scrutiny, revealing the dynamics of power, and the struggles for ownership that can underlie such events (Gillis, 1994; Ferriter, 2007). This article addresses the upcoming centenary of the 1916 Rising and its implications for Irish primary schools from the perspective of the teaching of history. It contrasts the centenary programme in education with that followed by the state in 1966 and suggests that there are both points of similarity and difference. The opportunities offered by current understanding of children's capacities to think historically and to engage with big ideas in age appropriate ways are discussed and the implications for how schools can engage with the centenary are briefly considered. The article concludes by suggesting that the decade of centenaries offers us the possibility of deep engagement on the wider purpose of history in education at all levels.

Looking back

Education has traditionally been seen as an important space for the construction of collective memories and identities and, in their focus on the primary curriculum and primary classrooms as key sites for the process of nation-building, the founders of the Irish Free State were following a path well-trodden by nation-states before and since (McCully and Waldron, 2013). By the mid-1960s, however, prompted by the growing political conviction that the economic future of the country was tied inexorably to the quality of its education system and its capacity to meet the needs of the economy, education was on the brink of radical change. With policy innovations such as the establishment of free second-level education by Donogh O'Malley in September 1966 and the introduction of a new curriculum at primary level in 1971, the period marked a significant shift in educational perspective from one that could be characterised as narrow and inward-looking to one that sought to embrace modernity and looked increasingly towards Europe and beyond. Located as it was on the threshold of change, it is not surprising that the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising gave rise to a range of responses.

While it is generally held that a celebratory and unreflective nationalism, seen as characteristic of history teaching in the early decades of the state, reached its apogee in the commemoration period, recent research has demonstrated a more complex story, revealing, for example, the extent to which the programme of events embodied a forward-looking narrative of modernisation (Daly and O'Callaghan, 2007). Holohan (2007) outlines the breadth, range and character of the events targeted at youth and school children, in the spirit of 'constructive patriotism' (p. 194), by the state during the 1966 commemorations, such as commemorative booklets sent to each school child; competitions in literature, art and music; the spectacle of 'Lá na nÓg', when 20,000 students from 200 Dublin schools marched to Croke Park to attend a special performance of Aiséirí; the renewed emphasis on the Irish language as the defining and the emphasis also on a forward-looking and practical model of patriotic citizenship mediated through publications such as Our Boys.

Looking forward

It is interesting then, to contrast how the centenary of 1916 is being marked in education with events in 1966. Under the banner of 'Youth and Imagination' the stated aim of the programme is to place 'children and young people at the centre of the Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme' and integrate 'historical exploration with a range of imaginative activities' (Government of Ireland, 2015, p. 15). While informed by a more critical and holistic approach to education, the programme includes several events and projects reminiscent of the earlier commemoration, such as all-Ireland competitions in history, drama, art, song and film, and the idea of national days and children's events. It also shares at least some of its objectives i.e. the desire to engage all children in the process of commemoration through shared experiences and imaginative reconstructions and using the commemoration as an opportunity to think about the future as well as the past.

The Centenary Programme for Education, launched on September 22nd, 2015 includes activities focusing on the Proclamation and the national flag, both of which were presented to all schools by representatives of the Defence Forces in the autumn of 2015. In particular, children are invited to explore the meaning of the Proclamation and to construct a new one. In addition, all institutions involved in education are to take part in 'Proclamation Day 2016' on 15 March, 2016, which will provide a platform for schools and other institutions to share their work on the commemoration with their communities. The idea of using the centenary as an opportunity to think about the future is developed further through regional consultations with children on the theme of 'Imagining our Future', the outcomes of which will be presented to 'ministers and decision-makers' at a children's event in April 2016 (p. 41).

While the similarities between the centenary programme and that rolled out in 1966 are striking, the context of education has altered significantly in the intervening period, not least in relation to how we view children as learners and as citizens in an educational context. In current educational thinking, for example, children are not the passive recipients of knowledge envisioned by traditional education but are actively engaged in constructing and re-constructing their understanding of the world. We view such understanding as socially constructed and facilitated through discussion, dialogue and debate. The idea of children as active participants in their own learning is informed also by an emerging understanding of chldren as rights-holders and citizens who have the right to voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making in areas that affect them. This idea of children as social actors, capable of acting in and on the world, makers of meaning and co-constructors of knowledge, is evident in the centenary programe, particularly in those components that offer spaces for children to make their views known.

Teaching history: children working as historians

These changing views of children are accompanied both nationally and internationally by changing views on the nature of school history and of the relationship between children and historical knowledge. The idea of the child as historian, characteristic of contemporary approaches to the teaching of history, locates the child as a generator of historical knowledge rather than simply a consumer. Asking historical questions, engaging with sources and historical accounts, children, together with their teachers, co-construct their understandings of the event, period, or phenomenon in question. Through their developing skills and growing understanding of historical concepts, children develop their capacities to think historically. The evidence over several decades has suggested that children's capacities are, in general, underestimated and that by the time children have reached senior primary, they are capable of engaging constructively with complex historical ideas and of thinking critically about the world (Barton, 1997).

It is evident that the centenary year offers rich opportunities to progress children's

thinking about key events in Irish history and their impact on the present, as well as helping them to think about the idea of commemoration itself. However, with its focus on symbols and children's participation, the centenary programme at primary level seems more firmly rooted in the citizenship strand of the SPHE curriculum rather than history. While it includes opportunities for research, they provide a limited frame for engagement. Using the opportunity of the centenary to engage more directly with children's historical understanding and with the connections between history and citizenship within education would be a fitting legacy for the future.

What might a good approach to teaching 1916 look like? Firstly, consistent with the view of history and of children as historians outlined above, and consonant with the state agenda in relation to the teaching of history as expressed in the primary curriculum, teaching 1916 should provide children with opportunities to: engage with historical sources and ask historical questions; to recognise the multiplicity of experiences, perspectives and narratives that characterised the event itself and the differential impact on diverse groups and individuals; to locate the event within a broader chronological framework, enabling children to identify key events, think about causation, make connections; to see the event within the context of its time, without a determined or known future, and to recognise the historical agency of people; to engage,

therefore, with motivations, world views and contemporary debates, contestations and divisions; to look at its aftermath, at the responses it provoked and the meaning it held. A good approach to teaching 1916 should also include opportunities to think about its meaning and legacy over time; to think about why, what and how we commemorate; to engage with historical significance and understand that that too can change over time; to understand that identifying 1916 with a single story excludes other events and stories and the individuals and communities for whom they have particular meaning; to understand that there are no simple stories, that historical events are messy and complex. The list could go on but I think the picture is clear.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while there is much to be welcomed in the Centenary Programme for Education in the focus it places on children as active citizens capable of thinking critically about the future world they wish to construct, less attention is paid to issues around the teaching of history. Yet, the centenary offers us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to think about why and how we teach history in primary schools and whether its potential contribution to citizenship education is being fully realised. If 1966 has come to represent a cautionary tale in relation to the teaching of history, we still need to work harder to realise its potential in 2016.

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Lecturers awarded for Bua na Cainte

Lecturers Martina Ní Fhátharta and Seán de Brún from Mary Immaculate College Limerick were presented with the European Language Label of the Year Award 2015 for Bua na Cainte, an innovative and fully-interactive Irish language programme for primary schools. They are pictured here with College President Prof Michael Hayes.

Pictured from left to right: **Seán de Brún, Prof Michael Hayes** *and* **Martina Ní Fhátharta**.

Schoolchildren join DCU President in shaping the future

In October 2015, Dublin City University (DCU) announced the first funding step of an ambitious €0.3bn development programme which aims to align DCU's research objectives with modern global challenges. The programme will see DCU deliver significant global impact in areas such as education, connected health, 21st Century media, conflict resolution and water security; increase its geographical footprint in the North Dublin region through multi-campus growth; and double its student body.

Professor **Brian MacCraith**, *President of Dublin City University, pictured with schoolchildren from Castleknock, Co Dublin, at the launch of the university's ambitious development programme.*

'Sheer quantity of work' biggest stressor for school leaders

A study conducted by Associate Professor Philip Riley from Australian Catholic University, on behalf of the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals (NAPD), has identified "sheer quantity of work" as the biggest source of stress for those in school leadership positions. Over 800 principals and deputy principals were surveyed, three-quarters from primary level and a quarter from secondary. Dr Riley found that those in leadership roles typically worked well above their core hours, with 43 per cent clocking in over 46 hours a week, and 15 per cent working over 56 hours a week.

Professor Philip Riley is pictured here addressing the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) conference held in January in City West Hotel, Dublin.

Pictured at the launch of the national primary schools essay competition titled 'Someone Like Me' were: children's author and rugby analyst **Brent Pope**, **Minister of State Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD**, *and a Dublin schoolgirl.*

Essay competition launched

Children's author and rugby analyst Brent Pope joined Minister of State Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD, and pupils from primary schools across Dublin, in Merrion Square Dublin on 15 September 2015 to launch a national primary schools essay competition titled 'Someone Like Me'. The competition is aimed at promoting positive attitudes towards disability in schools around the country.
"I am no stranger to feeling different and really believe it is so important that we celebrate our uniqueness, what sets us apart," Brent said.

Delegates soak up the atmosphere at the INTO annual congress in Ennis, Co Clare.

Delegates enjoy the 'buzz' at INTO conference

Pay and conditions of employment were top of the agenda at the INTO annual congress 2015, held this year in Ennis, Co Clare. A central motion called for the restoration of pay levels and the ending of the pension levy.

Delegates at the conference heard the Minister for Education Jan O'Sullivan declare that reducing class size would be a personal and political priority for her this year. She agreed also that general school funding, middle management posts, technology in schools, and teacher salaries were all worthy of greater funding. Delegates responded to her "aspirational" address with measured applause.

St Mary's School Dunmanway nets the prize

Fifth and sixth class students from St Mary's Senior School, Dunmanway, Co. Cork, scooped the national award in this year's 'Something Fishy' competition.

Organised by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) and aimed at 5th and 6th class primary students, the programme is based on the life cycle of salmon and gets students to explore water, fish, fish stocks, angling, conservation of rivers and lakes, and fish as part of the food chain. As well as class based work, IFI officers take students into the 'field' to get hands-on experience of their work. A comprehensive set of resources for teachers and children is available at www.somethingfishy.ie

Pictured at the 'Something Fishy' prize giving ceremony at West Cork Education Centre were: **Michael McPartland**, *Inland Fisheries Ireland;* **Mary O'Donovan**, *Director, West Cork Education Centre;* **Mairead Twohig**, *Principal, St Mary's Senior School, Dunmanway;* **Sarah Collins**, *class teacher;* **Noel Harrington TD**; **Jim Daly TD**; *and students from St Mary's Senior School, Dunmanway.*

chapter 3 | **Post Primary**

Chapter 3 **Contents**

Post Primary Education in Ireland: Evolution and impact over the course of the year

By **Ferdia Kelly**

General Secretary, Joint Managerial Body (JMB)

Junior Cycle Reform: the story so far

The Irish education system at post-primary level in 2015 has been dominated by the tension between the Department of Education & Skills and the teacher unions in relation to the Junior Cycle Reform programme. Following her ascent to the role of Minister for Education & Skills in summer 2014, Jan O'Sullivan T.D. set about re-building a relationship based on trust with the teacher unions.

Over a period of months, a process of discussion helped to create a level of understanding and belief which gradually persuaded the leaders of the teacher unions to actively engage with the Minister and her officials in an attempt to find a solution to the impasse. Dr Padraig Travers, retired President of St Patrick's College Drumcondra, was engaged to act as facilitator for the talks. Much progress was made towards a solution with the assistance of Dr Travers.

In the period after the teacher union conferences at Easter, intensive discussions led to a breakthrough with outline agreement being reached, and a document published on May 22nd last. The agreement signed by the Minister and the leaders of the teacher unions was entitled *Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation.*

In a statement issued by Minister O'Sullivan, she welcomed the agreement in principle and committed her officials to working with the union leaders to secure agreement on the resources necessary for the successful implementation of the new Junior Cycle programme. The following extract from the Minister's statement on May 22nd outlines the key principles underpinning the agreement and the main features of the proposal:

Underlying these proposals are Minister O'Sullivan's five main principles which she stated must be the basis of any change and have been agreed by the union executives as a basis for change:

1. The need to recognise a wide range of learning
2. A requirement to considerably reduce the focus on one terminal exam as a means of assessing our students
3. The necessity to give prominence and importance to classroom based assessment
4. Greater professional collaboration between teachers to be a feature of our schools
5. Both parents and students to get a broader picture of each student's learning throughout the whole of junior cycle

Both the Minister and the unions' executives have agreed on these principles as the basis for agreement.

> "Following her ascent to the role of Minister for Education & Skills in summer 2014, Jan O'Sullivan T.D. set about re-building a relationship based on trust with the teacher unions."

The main elements of the proposals for a reformed Junior Cycle are:

» A revised final exam will be marked by the State Examinations Commission (SEC)
» Subject teachers will assess students' progress through Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), with one assessment event per subject in both second and third years.
» A written Assessment Task, based on the second CBA, will be completed in each subject in third year, marked by SEC and form part of the overall exam result.
» Students will study a maximum of ten subjects for State certification.
» A new subject, Well-being, will be studied by all students. This will encompass Physical Education, SPHE and CSPE. New courses will be available for each of these subject areas, and overall learning time will be 400 hours.
» Students can take short courses, which will be based on programmes developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) or schools themselves, require 100 hours of learning, and be assessed through Classroom-Based Assessment.
» Following the completion of the three year Junior Cycle, students will receive from their school a Profile of Achievement document which will record their progress in all areas, including the written exam, the Classroom-Based Assessments, and other extra-curricular activities.
» An updated Junior Cycle Framework will be published by the end of June this year, providing full details of the possible combination of subjects and short courses.

Further discussions took place during June and, on July 8th, an *Appendix to the Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation* was published outlining an agreement on the resources that will be made available for teachers to assist them in the implementation of the new programme. The Minister, in her statement of July 8th last, committed to engaging with the management bodies and the NAPD to agree resources to support school management with the successful implementation of the agreed programme.

Both teacher unions, ASTI and TUI, conducted a ballot among their members in September to seek the approval of the membership for the *Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation.* The executive of TUI recommended an acceptance of the agreement, but the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the ASTI decided to put the *Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation* to the membership for ballot without a recommendation.

"The Minister, in her statement of July 8th last, committed to engaging with the management bodies and the NAPD to agree resources to support school management with the successful implementation of the agreed programme."

38% of the membership of ASTI voted with 55% rejecting the Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation. On a poll of 60%, the members of the TUI accepted the *Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation* on a 69% vote in favour of the proposals.

At the time of writing, the ASTI is seeking a direction from members as to the areas on which the union requires clarification prior to conducting a re-ballot of the members on these proposals. In the meantime, a programme of continuous professional development (CPD) is being organised for teachers and whole staff in Education and Training Board schools.

"38% of the membership of ASTI voted with 55% rejecting the Junior Cycle Reform – A Joint Statement on Principles and Implementation."

Management seeking commitment on appropriate resources

The management bodies, ACCS, ETBI, JMB, in collaboration with NAPD, are actively seeking a commitment from the Department of Education and Skills officials for the appropriate resources to be made available for school management to ensure the successful implementation of the Junior Cycle Reform programme. The management bodies and NAPD have submitted the following requirements as essential supports to assist schools in meeting the considerable challenges posed by the introduction of this new programme:

1. In-School Coordination
2. A Fit-for-Purpose ICT Framework in Every School
3. In-School Leadership in Teaching, Learning and Assessment
4. Whole-School Planning Time
5. Appropriate and Relevant CPD
6. A Communications Strategy

It is the view of the management bodies and NAPD that the Junior Cycle Reform programme is an exciting and valuable initiative in the Irish education system. The learning experience of pupils will be enhanced as will the teaching experience of teachers. However, without a commitment to provide appropriate resources and supports the whole essence of this initiative will be threatened. The successful roll-out of the programme will require intensive support during the implementation phase up to 2022 and ongoing support as the programme beds down in the subsequent years.

Other key highlights in 2015 for the post-primary sector include the following:

> "The new allocation model [for Special Educational Needs Resources] will in future be based on the profile of the school with an emphasis on decisions being made at local level as to how the resources are utilised."

A)   Centre for School Leadership

The announcement of the New Centre for School Leadership with Mary Nihill, Principal in Calasanctius College, Oranmore, Co Galway appointed as the first director was warmly welcomed. The Centre for School Leadership will provide an opportunity for a very important and necessary focus on school leadership at both primary and post-primary levels.

> "Following the completion of the three year Junior Cycle, students will receive from their school a Profile of Achievement document which will record their progress in all areas, including the written exam, the Classroom-Based Assessments, and other extra-curricular activities."

B)   New Allocation Model for Special Educational Needs Resources

The announcement of a proposed new model for the allocation of special educational needs resources to schools was generally welcomed at both primary and post-primary levels. However, the challenges posed by the introduction of such a model led to calls for a pilot project to be run in the school year 2015/16 at both levels.

The new allocation model will in future be based on the profile of the school with an emphasis on decisions being made at local level as to how the resources are utilised. The outcomes from the pilot project are eagerly awaited so that the school system can learn from such experiences and be supported in the implementation of the model. John Irwin, Assistant Secretary, ACCS, has written an article on the new model in this edition of *Education Matters Yearbook.*

C) A Digital Strategy for Schools – Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment

A Digital Strategy for Schools – Enhancing Teaching, Learning and Assessment was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan T.D. in October last. The Strategy sets out some very ambitious targets and places a focus on the following key themes:

» *Teaching, Learning and Assessment using ICT*
The Strategy identifies that as part of the cycle of continuously striving to enhance the pupil's learning experience, every effort must be made to further embed ICT into our education system at all levels. The Strategy will provide advice and guidance for teachers and schools, including examples of good practice on the use of ICT for teaching.

» *Teachers' Professional Learning*
Teachers, along with principals, will be instrumental in ensuring that ICT integration is achieved. There is a need to ensure that all teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to integrate ICT into their practice The use of ICT for teaching, learning and assessment will be embedded at each stage of the continuum of teacher education.

» *Leadership, Research and Policy*
There is a need for distributed leadership in order to truly integrate ICT across our education system. In addition to the Department of Education & Skills and its agencies, school management and other stakeholders will be required to provide leadership and take ownership of the challenge so that ICT integration can be achieved and learners are equipped with the key digital competencies.

» *ICT Infrastructure*
A focus will be placed on recent trends such as cloud computing in education and students bringing their own devices into schools. The Strategy will provide advice and support to schools in relation to these new trends, so that principals and teachers make better informed decisions at local level. It is essential that schools receive appropriate grants and advice for the purchase of hardware and software and the engagement of technical support. In addition an extensive programme of continuous professional development is essential to support principals and teachers to achieve the targets set out in this Strategy.

2015 has presented members of the education community, particularly in the post-primary sector, with many challenges. On the flipside we have received some positive signs that the difficult years associated with the recession are gradually coming to an end and we can look forward to the importance of education being recognised and appropriate investment and support being provided for the school communities.

Unravelling the Middle Management mess in second level schools

By **Pat O'Mahony**

Education Research Officer at
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)

Middle management issue gains traction

During 2014-2015, the matter of fit-for-purpose middle management structures and processes in second-level schools gained real traction. Firstly, the management bodies published blueprints for such structures. The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) and the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) collaborated to publish *Management Structures for Post-Primary Schools*[1], and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) published *21st Century School Management Systems Essential to Implementing and Sustaining Educational Reform in Irish Second-level Schools*[2].

These publications generated extensive discussion among school leaders, many of whom seemed to have given up hope of management structures being reformed during their term of principalship. Indeed, it was the palpable sense of hopelessness of many school leaders that had been the catalyst for the management bodies' publications.

While the plight of school leaders and the need for appropriate management structures to facilitate improved learner outcomes were manifest, research evidence was lacking. To remedy this, ETBI undertook a comprehensive survey of all ETB principals and deputy principals at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. Sixty-one percent of all schools responded. While anecdotal evidence abounds about the difficulties being endured by school leaders, this was the first time that we had reliable and rich research evidence.

ETBI survey of school leaders

A detailed examination of the survey findings is beyond the scope of this short article, but the following findings highlight the dimensions of the management/ leadership problem in second-level schools in Ireland:

» **85%** believe that their school does not have a sufficient number of assistant principal posts and 63% of those believe that the number would need to be increased by 50% or more to facilitate the effective operation of the school.

» **73%** believe that their school does not have adequate clerical or administrative support and 66% of those believe that the support would need to be increased by 60% or more to facilitate the effective operation of the school.

» **50%** feel that the work of a principal or deputy principal is so excessive that it impacts negatively on their work-life balance.

» **22%** say their work is so onerous that they feel constantly stressed.

» **64%** say that the inadequacy of the middle management system results in constant distraction from their core functions.

» **59%** believe that the current middle management system is ineffective in developing effective future principals and deputy principals.

» **71%** believe the current post-of-responsibility system is ineffective in facilitating educational reform in schools - the implementation of Junior Cycle reform, etc.

» **74%** do not believe that the current post-of-responsibility system effectively meets the specific management needs of schools.

- » **90%** feel the system leaves far too much responsibility and workload in the hands of the principal and his/her deputy.
- » **72%** feel the system is not fit-for-purpose.
- » **98%** believe there is an urgent need to agree a new middle-management system for second-level schools.

Several respondents indicated that the current job of the second level school principal is beyond the capacity of even the most committed and able, and that even though they may only be in their mid-50s, they cannot see themselves continuing in the role for much longer.

The findings imply that our second-level schools only continue to function on the back of the unconscionable burden that is being carried by principals and deputy principals – and that is not sustainable.

Concerns about the impact that school leadership is having on the health of those who lead our schools is confirmed also, in broad terms, in the 2015 *Irish Principals & Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Survey* report[3].

School management bodies make joint submission to DES

With all this as context, in January 2015 the three second-level school management bodies made a joint submission to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) about how the middle management system in post primary schools should be reformed. Subsequently the management bodies met regularly together, and also with the DES, to advance the reform project.

The case for reforming the way we manage our second-level schools may be summarised as follows.

The 21st century school, with the emphasis on delivering a constantly evolving curriculum and on the holistic welfare and development of a student group whose needs are changing by the day, is very different from the school of the late 1990s when the current post of responsibility system was established. Teaching is no longer about delivering a static curriculum to a compliant, homogeneous student group.

21st Century post-primary school faces new challenges

Today's post primary school is a complex institution which includes students from a variety of backgrounds experiencing different kinds of educational, social, emotional and economic disadvantage. Schools also face enormous challenges in a world where social, environmental, technological, economic and political turbulence threatens the fulfilment of long-cherished expectations. More than any other institution, the post-primary school is tasked with cultivating a citizenry capable of responding to these challenges – while continuing to use outdated management structures and processes.

> "… there is no point in blaming the DES, the unions, the management bodies or indeed the post holders themselves for our current dilemma. The current Posts of Responsibility system (1998) had dysfunction and obsolescence designed into its genetic code from the very beginning."

Furthermore, school leaders' desks are besieged daily by raft after raft of legislation, initiatives, circulars, guidelines and procedures, all of which imposes large amounts of management and administrative work, consuming the time and energy of principals and deputy principals and preventing them from attending to their primary leadership roles regarding teaching and learning, and student welfare and development.

Defective Post of Responsibility system compounded by moratorium

Though the school context has changed utterly in post-primary schools, day-to-day school management is substantially left to principals and deputy principals. The Post of Responsibility (POR) system is simply not fit-for- purpose, a truth that has been manifest for several years. And the moratorium

on recruitment and promotions in the public service further reduced significantly the capacity[4] of schools to cope with important functions, added greatly to the workload of school leaders, and diverted them from their key leadership role.

While many countries are challenged in the area of school leadership, Ireland seems to be more seriously challenged than most – particularly in the post-primary sector. For historical reasons, the importance of management in second-level schools has been seriously underappreciated, with the thinking going something like this:

» Management may be critical to the success of other organisations but education is different.
» Teaching is such a complex practice that it is not amenable to management.
» Teachers are independent professionals and it is not appropriate for others to intervene in their work.

In many respects, the management structures and processes in our schools substantially ignore decades of research and development in the cognate areas of organisational theory and management science. However, if we want principals and deputy principals to lead their schools, and to lead the reform of teaching and learning, then a management structure and process that facilitates this progression must be put in place in schools.

Defects in current system

The middle-management (POR) system in second-level schools is not fit-for-purpose. Principalship (and to a lesser degree, deputy principalship) has lost its savour and teachers suited to leadership roles are discouraged from applying for them by the overwhelming and growing demands of those roles.

There is no understanding between management and unions about what leadership and management entails in the school context. Management and leadership are not synonymous; rather, they are complementary and even symbiotic processes. Fundamentally, leadership is about facilitating the establishment of new directions and new goals for an organisation while management is about determining what actually needs to be done to achieve those goals and then directing, supporting and supervising the organisation's members as they seek to achieve agreed objectives.

In 2015 it is far too restrictive to discuss school leadership exclusively in terms of principalship or deputy principalship. Today, dispersed leadership and management are critical to schools both in defining and achieving their macro and micro goals.
The flat, minimalist, management structure embedded in our schools may not have been a problem when the job of schools was to deliver a relatively static curriculum to homogeneous groups of learners. But in 2015, with the school catering to the constantly changing needs of its students, the case for a contemporary management system is self-evident.

There is no obvious system in place to identify teachers with the capacity for leadership. Many new leaders are appointed on the basis of their apparent potential rather than on the basis of proven capacity – because, in the absence of either a fit-for-purpose middle management structure or a fit-for purpose system for identifying and developing future leaders, there is no way an aspirant leader can demonstrate his/her capacity.

Ultimately, the principal – and to a lesser degree the deputy – is responsible for ensuring that everything is done correctly in a school. There is no real potential for dispersed leadership or delegated management.

Our system for developing future school leaders is not fit-for-purpose. Notwithstanding the good work of Tóraíocht and similar initiatives, such programmes are insufficient to ensure that new school leaders can hit the ground running, as these programmes tend to focus on leadership which, though important, is only one side of the coin. Consequently, many principals and deputy principals only begin to acquire the knowledge, skills and competences for

management following their appointment – by and large on the job. While no training programme can prepare anyone fully for a new post, new principals and deputy principals are confronted with a precipice rather than a gentle learning curve.

While Irish principals and deputy principals obviously need to lead their schools, they also need to be competent managers; and, invariably, they need to carry out functions that in larger institutions could be delegated. Unless a principal can demonstrate to his/her staff that s/he can undertake basic administration and management functions competently from the beginning of his/her principalship, it will be difficult to engender confidence among the staff in his/her leadership.

Where to from here?

Firstly, there is no point in blaming the DES, the unions, the management bodies or indeed the post holders themselves for our current dilemma. The current POR system (1998) had dysfunction and obsolescence designed into its genetic code from the very beginning.

The time has come to redesign, implement and sustain a new middle management system for second-level schools that:

» eases the unconscionable burden on principals and deputy principals and gives them the time and space to lead their schools;
» facilitates the work of teachers being appropriately led, supported and overseen by colleagues with the competences, authority and responsibility for undertaking such work;
» focuses not on 'commanding and controlling' but on a decentralisation of managerial decisions, change

management, capacity building, mentoring, empowerment, professional discussion, team work and the interdependence of all staff;
» sees the school as a learning organisation and supports the commitment and capacity of all staff to updating continuously their knowledge, skills and dispositions;
» involves performance management for all staff, those who teach and those who manage;
» most importantly, continuously improves student outcomes – their learning and their holistic personal development.

Such a management system would not only enable the school to set and achieve its goals; it could be a powerful force for empowering school leaders and teachers and improving their sense of professional satisfaction at a time when the morale of school leaders and teachers everywhere is being seriously undermined.

The school management bodies and the DES have met regularly for very constructive discussions around the whole matter of reforming the middle management structures and processes for second-level schools since the beginning of 2015. Hopefully, these discussions and subsequent discussions with the teacher unions will result in the putting in place of contemporary structures and processes for the effective management of our schools, without overburdening principals and deputy principals. Unless schools have modern management systems, much of the programme to reform post-primary education to the benefit of future generations of learners will have been lost. So, if we wish to reform our schools, then we have no option but to firstly reform the way we manage our schools.

1. http://www.jmb.ie/images/pdf/Finance/News/Management_Structures_for_Post-Primary_Schools_Proposal.pdf
2. http://www.etbi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/etbi_middle_management_17_09_14.pdf
3. www.principalhealth.org/ie/2015_Final_Report_Irelanf.pdf
4. Prior to the moratorium (2009) there were 5,600 Assistant Principal Posts in post-primary schools and this has been reduced to 3,300. Similarly, there were 8,226 Special Duties posts at post-primary level pre-moratorium and these were reduced to 5,087 for the 2014/15 school year. The numbers in these posts have been reduced further for the 2015/2016 school year.

It's PISA time again

By **Clive Byrne**

Director, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)

In March 2015, some 5,000 students in approximately 165 Irish schools undertook PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), the OECD triennial international survey which evaluates the skills and knowledge of 15-and 16-year year-olds in mathematics, science and reading. The results of this survey will be published in late 2016.

> **"PISA assesses the extent to which young people have acquired knowledge and skills essential to their full participation in society and the variation in these skills over time."**

PISA assesses the extent to which these young people have acquired knowledge and skills essential to their full participation in society and the variation in these skills over time. Importantly, the principal objective of PISA is not to assess the extent to which the young people have attained the objectives set out in school curricula but to assess students' knowledge and competencies in contexts as close to real-life situations as possible.

The 2009 national "calamity"

We all recall the consternation caused by the 12-place drop in Ireland's literacy performance in the 2009 PISA results. With the country nicely in recession, the results were viewed as a national calamity. In the boardrooms, where key decisions are made about investment and job creation, the PISA results really matter. Unfortunately, standout newspaper headlines refer only to national rankings and, where the news is grim, adverse comments can be included about our education system and those working in it.

> **"...The principal objective of PISA is... to assess students' knowledge and competencies in contexts as close to real-life situations as possible."**

As we await the results of the 2015 tests, it is important that school leaders, and indeed all of us, reflect on what PISA is about and what and how we can learn from the results when they emerge.

When I began my own reflection recently, I recalled the following comment that I made to the NAPD National Executive following the publication of the findings of the 2009 PISA results.

> *These scores will provide the education sector with food for thought. We can't just say that we're happy with the science scores, project maths will hopefully sort out the Maths problem, and we can agonise over the reasons for the twelve place drop in literacy. We need joined-up thinking between the primary and second level. The move to reform the Junior Cycle can't come soon enough. We also need to stop using the Leaving Certificate as a filter for third level because what happens at Leaving Certificate level governs everything else that's taught down the line. High performing systems allow schools to design curricula and assessment policies. We need to trust our schools, our school leaders and our teachers more, and stop harping on about how great we are. The way the country is at the moment, average is not good enough.*

> "In the boardrooms, where key decisions are made about investment and job creation, the PISA results really matter."

The 2012 reprieve

Move forward to 2012, at the height of the recession, and the news from PISA was more encouraging – Irish students had scored above the international average in reading, maths and science in the international league tables. This information was welcomed extensively, with Irish students now ranked 4th in reading, 13th in mathematics, and 9th in science out of 34 OECD countries. It was felt that the improved results showed the benefits of changes in teaching methodology and from an educator's point of view they endorsed the high level of quality in Irish education. But despite Ireland's above average performance, one of the worrying findings was that higher achieving students in Ireland were underperforming relative to other countries.

Lost ground recovered due to actions taken

Ireland's 'recovery' is a reassuring reversal of fortune. The unexpected drop in performance in reading and maths in the 2009 results gave rise to a lot of soul-searching in the Irish system and it is welcome that the lost ground has been recovered as a result of investment in literacy and numeracy and new teaching strategies. There was a significant reduction in the number of skipped questions in PISA 2012 – which had been a feature of the 2009 scores. The biggest improvement in 2012 was in science with very little difference in the performance of boys and girls. This improvement that has come about as the long-term investment in that subject area has started to pay off.

> "The improved results [in the 2012 PISA survey] showed the benefits of changes in teaching and methodology."

Interestingly, while Ireland scored significantly above the OECD average in mathematics in 2012, there was no improvement in the average scores achieved by Irish students compared to 2003, when mathematics was also the major domain. It would seem that the impact of Project Maths on the curriculum will not be apparent for some time to come – maybe as much as six or nine years given that the foundations of our improved science results were laid in 2003.

> "Investment to minimise disadvantage in our education system seems to be bearing fruit - much of Ireland's above average performance (in PISA survey] can be attributed to the relatively good performance of lower-achieving students."

More importantly, there has been a pleasing reduction in students performing at lower levels in the PISA subjects, but there has been no great upsurge among high performers.

Urgent need for effective reform of teaching and learning

The message is stark. While morale in schools has been dented by the attrition of cut-backs in resources and personnel and the effects of innovation fatigue, there is nothing about the results to suggest that there can be any let-up in efforts to effectively reform our teaching and learning in these areas. Investment to minimise disadvantage in our education system seems to be bearing fruit – much of Ireland's above average performance can be attributed to the relatively good performance of lower-achieving students.

Equity

The OECD also suggests that there is a greater element of equity in the Irish education system but it's probably truer to say that Ireland's education system is **less inequitable** than that of other countries. A major difference between Ireland and Finland, for instance, is that in Finland the

variation between schools is minimal, which is far from the case here. According to the Finnish Education Minister, "we have to make sure that, wherever they live, parents can rely on it that their children get the best possible instruction in the neighbourhood school".

> "The message is stark... there is nothing about the [PISA] results to suggest that there can be any let-up in efforts to effectively reform our teaching and learning in these areas."

On the other side of the coin, nearly half of Finnish boys said, when asked, that they do not read any texts for pleasure either on the net or in print, and a majority of Finnish students stated that they do not like school.

Things are not always what they seem

As we await the findings of the 2015 survey, our appetites have been whetted by the recently published results from another OECD study from the same stable that conducts the PISA surveys. This survey found that Ireland is close to the bottom of an international table on the use of computers in schools, as well as for homework. In a perverse way, however, this may be a good thing because the 'impact of computer and internet use on test scores shows there is no appreciable improvements in student achievement in reading, mathematics and science in countries that have invested heavily in ICT for education'.

> "We need to stop using the Leaving Certificate as a filter for third level because what happens at Leaving Certificate level governs everything else that's taught down the line."

PISA study is a fount of enormous and rich data

The OECD is an authoritative body and it is a real pity that the rich data contained in the PISA study findings is often reduced to crude league tables about how well or poorly individual countries have performed.

Politicians must not rush to use top line figures as crude accountability mechanisms often designed to criticise (ignorantly) aspects of the education system. Such ill-informed commentary can be likened to an individual who knows the cost of everything but the value of nothing.

As school leaders, we must strive to convince our politicians that they must see education as an investment, not as a cost. Politicians see issues in short-term electoral cycles. Education doesn't and can't do "short-term". It needs careful nurturing, adequate resourcing and trust in our teachers for our investment in the next generation to pay off.

Data from PISA requires correct interpretation

PISA results matter, particularly when it comes to global investment. Science is the major domain for the 2015 assessment and when the results of the survey are published in late 2016, while the country rankings will probably be the big news story in the media, the study itself will generate an enormous amount of data which can inform policy and educational priorities. Let's not go for the cheap headline – let's use the rich data to analyse the results and see what we can do better next time out.

> "A [different OECD] survey found that Ireland is close to the bottom of an international table on the use of computers in schools, as well as for homework. In a perverse way, this may be a good thing..."

A Foreign Languages Strategy for Ireland Summary of the submissions made to the Framework for Consultation

By **Karen Ruddock**

National Co-ordinator of the Post-Primary Languages Initiative

Introduction

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is committed to "develop and commence implementation of a new foreign languages in education strategy" as part of the 2015 Action Plan for Jobs. As part of this process, the views of stakeholders were sought in 2014, and almost 80 submissions were received. The largest number of submissions came from the post-primary sector (31), but there was a large number of detailed submissions put together collaboratively by groups of experts in the Higher Education sector (15). Further Education was particularly underrepresented (2) and voices from Enterprise and Business were also faint (5). Two fora were later organised to provide further opportunity for discussion.

> "The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is committed to 'develop and commence implementation of a new foreign languages in education strategy' as part of the 2015 Action Plan for Jobs."

There was broad agreement in relation to many issues and this highlighted a shared awareness of the issues needing to be resolved, rather than a sense that those making submissions were merely referencing the many previously published papers outlining similar concerns.

The following is a brief summary of the points made in the context of seven main themes.

> "Many [surveyed stakeholders] think that Modern Foreign Languages in post-primary schools should be core and compulsory."

(I)   Awareness Raising

One of the main issues identified was the need for raising awareness, in particular among school management and employers (who 'don't know what they don't know'), of the value of learning foreign languages.

(II)   Languages not Foreign Languages

Many expressed disappointment that the Framework for Consultation limited its remit to 'foreign' languages in Ireland, which does not take cognisance of the fact that, for many, English and Irish are 'foreign' languages and therefore do/should have a place in this context. There are continuities between the different languages individuals learn suggesting that a more integrated approach to all language provision would be better.

(III) School Languages

Many think that Modern Foreign Languages in post-primary schools should be core and compulsory. The new Junior Cycle Framework represents an opportunity to reform

curricula and exams and a compulsory oral should be part of the new Junior Cycle specification. There should be an increase in the proportion of marks awarded for oral competence in Leaving Certificate, an increase in the number of language assistants, and better use made of European programmes e.g. Erasmus+ and e-twinning.

Diversification is an imperative and we need to move beyond the idea that French, German and Spanish are the only languages worth having in the curriculum. The challenges experienced with diversification in relation to Japanese and Russian need to be addressed so that further diversification can take place. Arabic and Portuguese should be championed by central government and a teaching profession with job prospects needs to be developed for Mandarin Chinese.

Many asked for the re-introduction of modern languages in primary schools, since research confirms that early learning not only enhances awareness of languages but fosters readiness to acquire other languages later in life.

(IV) Teacher Education

There was agreement on a need for better Initial Teacher Education (ITE), minimum criteria for language proficiency entry levels to ITE programmes, and a language component on Professional Master of Education (PME) programmes.

Teachers were particularly vocal concerning the need for an increase in opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD), both in terms of language upskilling and teaching methodology, and they would like to see CPD incentivised and accredited.

(V) Role of employers and Higher/ Further Education

Employers should provide information on career opportunities available to graduates with language skills and make foreign language competence an important criterion in graduate recruitment; they should invest in philanthropy on third-level campuses, provide internships abroad as well as incentivised in-house language training for staff.

In relation to third level, there is a need to raise the profile of courses with languages in order to attract better students. There is also a need to address the serious underfunding of language courses, and to use teaching methodology that will enable students to become more autonomous learners. More students need to be encouraged to engage in international exchanges and work placements which enable them to use the target language through the Target Language and international students should be recognised as a linguistic resource who can engage in mutual language exchange with local students.

More third-level language modules should be accredited as part of degree programmes, and possibilities for doing foreign languages as electives at third-level should be increased.

In the context of Further Education, SOLAS should encourage the development of specialised language training modules and teaching methodology for teachers and trainers in Further Education and Training (FET) and languages should be given a greater credit rating on Further Education courses to compensate for the extra time involved.

(VI) Community languages

Contributors didn't like the term 'migrant languages' and preferred to use the term 'L1', 'community', or 'home' languages. This diverse language capacity among the 'new Irish' should be maintained.

Schools and parents need to hear the message that the mother tongue is an asset rather than a hindrance. Teachers need guidance on how to teach bilingual children, they need training in the use of methodologies for encouraging maintenance of the children's' home language, including the implementation of differentiation and co-operative learning, and the use of Content and Language Integrated

Learning (CLIL) techniques. Children need increased and extended support in English as an Additional Language (EAL). Parents of these children need information on why it is worth supporting their children in maintaining their mother tongue.

Schools that wish to offer support in the L1 should be supported and should be given guidelines on establishing criteria for teaching home languages. Some additional languages can be introduced in schools through the Short Course facility. Availability of the non-curricular languages at Leaving Certificate should be promoted and two levels (higher and ordinary) should be introduced, along with aural and oral components. An online language curriculum could be delivered from Infants to Leaving Certificate and the introduction of multilingual primary schools would be groundbreaking.

Schools that teach home languages at week-ends in what is known as the complementary education sector need to be recognised and regulated. Teaching Council criteria currently exclude registration of teachers who teach subjects which are not on the Leaving Certificate curriculum, even if they are fully qualified teachers in their home countries.

(VII) Benchmarking all languages across all sectors with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

All sectors want this, in order to introduce transparency and coherence across levels and languages, and to facilitate educational and occupational mobility across jurisdictions.

A Languages Advisory Board could oversee this benchmarking, as well as achieve coherence among stakeholders and agencies, commission research, and collaborate with the relevant European bodies.

All the submissions are currently being reviewed by the DES in the course of developing a Foreign Languages Strategy for Ireland and it is anticipated that the strategy will be published in early 2016.

Embedding Entrepreneurial Education in Post Primary Schools

By **Joan Russell**

Projects Manager for Instructional Practices with ETBI

Entrepreneurial education – the development of an entrepreneurial attitude and skills in students – is very much on the policy agenda at both national and European level.

When reviewing relevant literature and policy documents on Entrepreneurial Education, it becomes obvious that a conceptual shift has taken place in recent years from defining entrepreneurship as "How to run a business" to "How to develop a general set of competences applicable in all walks of life" (*European Union 2012, p. 11; European Commission 2009, 2011, Eurydice 2012, Aff/ Hahn 2005, Hekmann/Lindnder 2009*).

Europe

For almost a decade now, the European Commission has held the view that entrepreneurship must be embedded in the education system and that it should be available at primary, post primary and third level. The Commission recognises that In order to achieve this objective teaching and learning entrepreneurial skills in schools and colleges must be fostered and developed. Furthermore, the Commission has advocated that:

… two sets of complementary actions should be incorporated into entrepreneurship education. The first should aim at developing attitudes and behaviour, particularly traits such as personal responsibility, creativity, leadership, problem-solving and being proactive. The second set of actions should focus on the technical and managerial competences required to start and run an organisation.

Ireland

In the Irish context, The Report of the Entrepreneurship Forum, January 2014, has recommended the need to *develop a National Educational Strategy for Entrepreneurship that embeds the teaching of entrepreneurship into primary & post primary schools and third level colleges, as well as incorporating initiatives in life-long learning and skills development programmes*.

More recently, Mr. Danny McCoy, CEO, IBEC, stated: *Infusing entrepreneurial thinking into the education system has a myriad of positive effects, including economic growth, increased societal reliance but also individual growth, increased school engagement and improved equality. (*Entrepreneurial education, Policy recommendations to deliver skills needed for the workplace of the future)

Department of Education and Skills

Developing an Entrepreneurial Education Strategy is equally an important item on the agenda for the Department of Education and Skills. It hosted a forum on *Entrepreneurship in Education* in September 2014 and again in 2015. This afforded an opportunity for significant educational and business partners to examine the current provision in terms of entrepreneurial education and examine a way forward to have it embedded at post primary and further education levels.

Time for a proactive approach

The time has come to become more proactive and to develop the notion that schools can be sites of entrepreneurial activity within and outside the curriculum.

A clear understanding of what is meant by entrepreneurial education and what needs to be achieved is crucial to the development of an effective education strategy. What is it exactly that we are aiming to develop in our students? What is meant by an entrepreneurial attitude? What do we mean by entrepreneurial skills? How could it successfully fit in education?
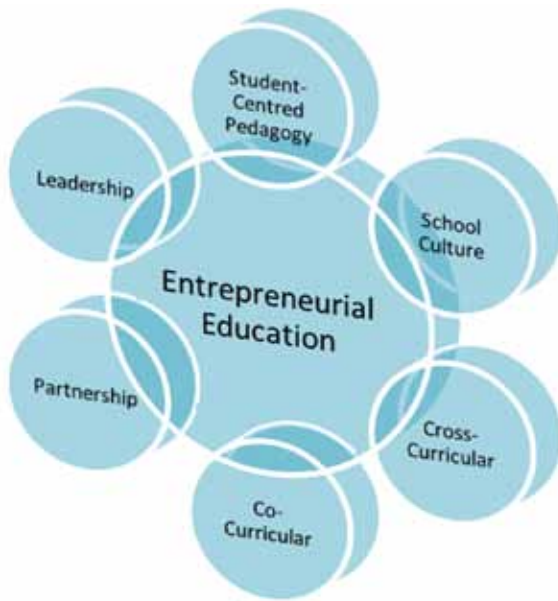
Leadership essential in fostering entrepreneurial culture

A school culture that is welcoming of change, embraces opportunity, is willing to take calculated risks, relishes the opportunity to learn from mistakes, celebrates success, and invests in the creative attributes of its stakeholders, is a culture that is conducive to effective entrepreneurial education. The fostering of such a culture requires investment in the development of an entrepreneurial mind-set within leaders, teachers and learners, as well as equipping them with the relevant skills.

Leadership and collaboration are at the core in fostering an entrepreneurial school culture. Entrepreneurial activity needs to be led and needs to be part of the overall school improvement conversation.

Developing an entrepreneurial mindset

Various programmes at senior cycle in post-primary schools – LCA, LCVP, TY Mini-Company and Business Studies – offer students an opportunity to explore life in business. However, the focus is generally on the technical knowledge required to establish and run a business – but entrepreneurial education is more than this.

Entrepreneurial education is about preparing students with skills that equip them for life and for the world of enterprise and/or employment. The Framework for Junior Cycle, with its focus on the development of *Key Skills* and *Statements of Learning,* will promote the development of an entrepreneurial mindset within students. At senior cycle however much more needs to be done. We need to ensure that entrepreneurial education is explicitly central, as key learning outcomes, in every subject and in every classroom, at junior and senior levels.

Reliant on a student-centred pedagogy

Developing and nurturing an entrepreneurial attitude and entrepreneurial skills is heavily reliant on a creative student-centred pedagogy – pedagogy that facilitates enquiry based learning and enables students to demonstrate leadership, be creative, reflective, and responsible and even take calculated risks while acquiring new skills and knowledge. Consequently, teachers need to be given an opportunity to upskill where necessary as well as sharing practice and resources.

Extra-curricular activities

The extra-curricular programme offered by schools/colleges can also provide an ideal platform for the development of an entrepreneurial mind-set and skill-set, whether in sport, drama, debating etc. and should be seen as an opportunity to do so.

Partnerships

The establishment of a meaningful partnership between schools and local businesses, industries, associations and organisations is a vital contribution to the promotion of an entrepreneurial school culture. Such partnerships afford staff and students the opportunity to understand the business world, what it means to be enterprising in the world outside and within school.

National Register for volunteer entrepreneurs

The Report of The Entrepreneurship Forum, 2014, recommended *the Introduction of a National Register for volunteer entrepreneurs who would be willing to visit schools to engage with students at local level.* These partnerships need to be supported with training, so as to maximise their value. Schools need to understand business culture and equally businesses need to understand a school culture.

Edison Programme

Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI) is currently engaged in a European Project called *Edison.* This is a professional development programme for teachers, developed by representatives from six European countries – Ireland (ETBI), Spain, Austria, The Netherlands, Italy and the UK – working collaboratively. The development of the programme is financed by the European Commission as a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project.

Edison specifically aims to support teachers in fostering an entrepreneurial attitude and developing entrepreneurial skills of students at both post primary and further education level. It specifically aims to encourage teachers and students to consider what it is to be an entrepreneur, to identify their own entrepreneurial skills and qualities before aiming to enhance five particular entrepreneurial skills through a collaborative, active and focused programme.

- » Develop Personal Entrepreneurial Skills and Qualities
- » Learn additional Entrepreneurial Skills through activity

The Programme defines Entrepreneurial Education as follows:

To be 'entrepreneurial' means that you take action when you see opportunities and are prepared to take risks to exploit those opportunities. You are willing to work outside the usual boundaries. Entrepreneurship is about exploration with some risks, to create added value. It is about turning good ideas into action, turning concepts into reality and cementing new ideas into successful innovation.

Pilot programmes

Edison 'ETBI has successfully piloted the Edison programme' with a group of volunteer schools, from the ETB and Community & Comprehensive School sectors in the southern region. The teachers involved will now go on to become trainers in their own schools. A second pilot commenced in October 2015, along the east coast. A presentation pack with whole school/centre and classroom resources has been developed and is available to each participating school/centre.

ETBI's Plans for the future

The Edison Programme will be formally launched in early 2016. An opportunity will then be afforded to all teachers across the sectors to complete the programme.

A short course for Junior Cycle will be developed before the end of 2015/2016 and a Further Education Programme will be developed thereafter. A website will also be developed to support schools in sharing practice and resources.

sfi

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ENGINEERING

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MARINE BIOLOGY

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE

CYBER SECURITY

Barry O'Sullivan (Dragon's Den), CEO of Altocloud, with CAO students.

check out **www.smartfutures.ie** for more information

Giving students a head start for the jobs of the future

A survey carried out by Science Foundation Ireland last year found that 62% of third-level students cited 'fitting in' as the biggest factor influencing how they chose their course of study.

With 'fitting in' rated as more important than course requirements (28%) or career prospects (56%), it follows that students with negative perceptions about science or people working in an area like engineering (such as it being too geeky, too difficult or only about working in a lab) are unlikely to see themselves 'fitting in' and likely to discount such pathways.

Given the ever growing need for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) graduates in Ireland, where well paid, dynamic and fulfilling roles are available to students of different capabilities, it is vital that we inform students about STEM careers and challenge negative stereotypes. This is particularly important in encouraging young females, where engagement with female role models can greatly increase their participation.

Making a difference

Smart Futures was set up as a collaborative programme between government, industry and education to address this issue. It is managed by Science Foundation Ireland in partnership with Engineers Ireland and other bodies.

The website www.SmartFutures.ie provides students with real-life examples of STEM careers in Ireland, video interviews and career profiles and gives students access to role models through its volunteer programme. Secondary school teachers, TY coordinators or guidance counsellors can register their school for free career talks at any time over the school year.

With over 700 volunteers with all kinds of STEM-related backgrounds, from pharmaceuticals to food science, energy to software engineering, students can learn first-hand about what a career in STEM is really all about, discover what sectors are thriving and have their stereotypes challenged. This can be a huge help to students getting ready to make CAO choices.

Over 50 partners including SAP, IBM, Abbott Ireland and Teagasc are providing volunteers for school visits, and the programme has engaged with over 75,000 secondary school students to date.

What can I do?

While schools can access free career talks, parents can also help. Students can be encouraged to get involved in STEM-related activities such as Coder Dojo or Mathletes and attend events and festivals like Science Week and Engineers Week etc. for some interactive fun.

Check out **www.Smartfutures.ie** for more information.

Is inequitable guidance counselling service a violation of human rights?

By **Betty McLaughlin**

President of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors

'Educational equity is a moral imperative for a society in which education is a crucial determinant of life chances.' (Levin, 2009)

Unequal impact of cuts across different school types

To determine the impact of the cuts to the guidance counselling service in Ireland imposed by the Government in the 2012 Budget, Harkin (2015) undertook research in second level schools. He found that, while the reduction impacted negatively on the distribution of care throughout the entire guidance service, this cutback was not experienced equally by all school types.

> "… a diversified service model of guidance had developed across schools as a result of varying views of individual school principals regarding the relative importance of a guidance counselling service in their schools."

His research revealed that a diversified service model of guidance had developed across schools as a result of varying views of individual school principals regarding the relative importance of a guidance counselling service in their schools. The biggest difference was found between fee-charging schools and schools in the Free Education System (FES). In fee-charging schools, it appeared that there was an ability to access additional sources of finance and funding; that parent power had an impact on decision-making around guidance services; and that both the school management and parents regarded guidance counselling, particularly career guidance, as important.

> "The biggest difference was found between fee-charging schools and schools in the Free Education System."

It is clear, therefore, that the removal of the dedicated guidance counselling service has entrenched the privilege of those who are already privileged, and undermined the prospects of those from less advantaged backgrounds of achieving their potential, with a subsequent adverse impact on these students' ability to succeed at second level. "If the intention is to improve learning outcomes for children and to encourage learning in all aspects of their lives, provision of supports in schools is a necessary and basic requirement" (Barnardos, 2012).

Guidance Counselling service at an all-time low

Today in Ireland, the guidance counselling service in second level schools, and further education & training (FET) colleges, is in its worst state in the history of education in this country. It is painful to watch the invaluable provision that had been built up, developed and enhanced over decades – through both government policy and the professionalism of qualified guidance counsellors – being eroded. It is distressing to realise that many students are not now receiving the essential supports necessary to allow them to achieve their potential and to progress their educational goals, commensurate with their aptitudes and abilities. It is exasperating to see the vulnerable

and disadvantaged students hurt most in this uneven and disjointed system of provision. The unequal and inadequate service that currently operates in schools has major implications in the context of the Government's stated commitment to reducing social and economic inequality and promoting social inclusion.

1998 Education Act requires guidance counselling as part of school plan

Guidance counselling is the entitlement of all, and not a luxury for only those who can afford it. This entitlement within our schools and FET colleges is explicitly acknowledged in Section 9C of the 1998 Education Act, which requires that a guidance counselling programme be part of a school plan and specifically identifies the central role of the professionally qualified guidance counsellor.

It is a function of Government to support all children in achieving their potential firstly by acknowledging students' universal entitlement to guidance counselling support, and secondly by providing a fit-for-purpose guidance counselling service to all students who wish to avail of it, no matter what their circumstances. The IGC believes that it is only when access to appropriate guidance counselling is established as a basic human right that students can fulfil their personal, educational and vocational potential.

Disproportionate negative impact on more vulnerable students

During the last five years, as a result of the imposed changes to the guidance counselling service in schools, issues such as youth unemployment, under-employment, early school-leaving/early tertiary leaving, and social and economic inactivity of young Irish adults have increased and deepened. Sadly, it is the more vulnerable students (Special Needs, Travellers, non-English-speaking Foreign Nationals, and other socio-economically disadvantaged students) who are disproportionately negatively impacted because there is no substitute service available to them.

Educational achievement and self-image

In recent research (ERSI, 2015), Dr Emer Smyth found that a child's self-image is not as strongly influenced by social background factors as other factors, such as educational achievement. In contrast to children from professional and managerial backgrounds, children from homes that are the most disadvantaged in terms of financial and educational resources have the worst outcomes in terms of behaviour, happiness and anxiety. Having a special educational need (SEN) generates a more negative self-image; and the gap in academic self-image between young people with and without SEN has grown over time. Of concern is that children from immigrant families are more negative about themselves across all of the dimensions of self-image, though less than for those children with SEN.

It is this diversity that poses the challenge for school principals in addressing both teaching practice and guidance counselling support for children with differing self-images, as well as abilities. This highlights the importance of engaging with students, managing the transition from primary to second level, and providing support and feedback in ways that minimise the potentially negative effects on students' self-image and wellbeing.

Guidance counselling at Junior Cycle level

Wellbeing is a core principle of the new Junior Cycle curriculum. It is defined as "children being confident, happy and healthy" (NCCA, 2009), and is seen as "contributing directly to their physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing and resilience" (DES, 2012). The IGC believes that guidance counselling is at the hub of the wheel of support offered to students – a service with internal referral system coordinated by professional guidance counselors. However, the IGC (2013) found that only 9.69% of classroom guidance practice hours by guidance counsellors were spent on junior cycle students. Smyth & Calvert (ERSI, 2011) highlight the crucial role played by student experiences at junior cycle in shaping their

later pathways and outcomes; that this has very profound consequences both for guidance and support for young people; that the focus should be on much earlier levels; and there is a need to have much more time for individual contact with the guidance counsellor than currently happens.

Mental Health & Wellbeing
Over the last decade, the needs of students in second level schools in modern Ireland have changed beyond recognition. Students today bring a variety of life issues into the classroom – ADHD, anger issues, and emotional and behavioural problems. These are students living with drug and alcohol addicted parents, students with addiction problems themselves, students who have experienced suicide of a family member or friend and may be contemplating suicide themselves, and students living with physical, emotional and sexual abuse on a daily basis, to name but a few. These students need a dedicated school-based professional guidance counselling service; a service fit-for-purpose where one-to-one counselling is a life-line that offers a chance in life to these students — a chance that, due to short-sighted cuts in guidance, has been destroyed.

It is this diversity that poses the challenge for school principals in addressing both teaching practice and guidance counselling support for children with differing mental health issues, as well as academic abilities. The guidance counsellor is the first point of contact, without a referral, offering a free face-to-face counselling service, in an education system where the onward referral system has stretched to the point of collapse, and children are waiting sometimes for years to be seen.

Summary
The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2016. The IGC has campaigned consistently and tirelessly since 2012 by providing overwhelming evidence-based data demonstrating the damage done to the service as well as the value of guidance counselling to Irish students. The dismantling of this 40-year old public service to the students of this country should be deemed a violation of their human rights.

Editorial Comment

Following October's Budget announcements, as part of the Education estimate for 2016 the pupil teacher ratio (PTR) in post primary schools will be reduced from 19 to 1 to 18.7 to 1.

Of the 550 equivalent posts created by this measure, 250 will be used to reduce the teaching time of deputy principals in schools of under 500 students.

The Minister for Education & Skills Jan O'Sullivan has indicated that she wants schools to use the remaining 300 equivalent posts to improve the level of delivery of guidance counselling in schools. In schools of 500 students, principals would have a total of nine additional teaching hours at their disposal as a result of this reduction in the PTR.

While welcome, this additional resource targeted at guidance counselling is not a return to the ex-quota position which operated prior to 2012. The determination of how all teaching hours are allocated in each school will still be a matter for each Principal and the board of management.

One would hope that principals will use the discretion provided to them through this measure to address the inequity which has arisen in the provision of guidance counselling in different schools. However, without a specific ex quota provision, the success or failure of this measure in ensuring that every child has access to appropriate guidance, as per section 9C of the Education Act, is still dependant on the value placed on guidance counselling by each individual school principal.

Student Support Teams Pilot Project 2014-2017
Creating an evidence-informed Framework for Student Support Teams in Second-Level Schools

By **Margaret Crogan**

Regional Director, National Educational Psychological Service

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Three support services, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and City of Dublin Education and Training Board's (CDETB) Psychological Service at the beginning of the 2014/2015 school year embarked on a collaborative three year project involving a mix of post primary schools in Dublin, Wicklow and Meath. The impetus for the project was the publication of *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention* (2013) and *Student Support Teams in Post-Primary Schools* (2014). The project team set out to create and implement a practical, evidence-based framework which includes professional development opportunities to assist schools in developing Student Support Team (SST) practice and procedures. Student Support Teams have traditionally been known as 'Pastoral care teams' or 'Care teams'.

Schools are challenged in achieving a systemic or school wide integrated approach to the support of staff and students in dealing with the range of challenges that present. In the words of a participant, the Student Support Team Project helps the schools involved deal with "*the random chaos of life that gets in the way of the teaching and learning.*"

Having a good student support system in place is essential to the effective management of a school. Maintaining the system is difficult but essential as the team deals with what another participant described as "*mental health and behaviour and attendance and teaching and learning*"

Often individual staff members are looking for quick fixes to problems but the experienced teachers know that there are no quick fixes to many of the challenges faced by school staff members. However being prepared and organised to meet challenges will facilitate problem solving and the management of dilemmas. As described by a participant "*many students will display behavioural difficulties as a result of other issues happening in their lives, particularly in the home. We would also deal a lot with withdrawal in kids and concerns arise here with mental health.*"

What is involved?

In September 2014, a group of schools were invited to participate over a period of three years and provided with a document outlining the structure of the project including its rationale, aims and implementation plan. The project is process focused and schools are supported in reflecting upon their current pastoral practices and procedures as well as embarking on systemic planning for the continued development of their student support teams. Areas highlighted for consideration include:

» **Defining a Student Support Team** i.e. exploring what a student support team is and its functions in a school (including a focus on mental health).
» **Reviewing and developing core practices** that are a necessary part of implementing a student support team as outlined in the Student Support Teams Guidelines, for example:
  » Procedures: meeting times (calendar), adequate time allocation, managing requests for assistance, management of team meetings,

referral systems and consistent practices for problem solving and decision making by the team.

» Membership: criteria for selection of team members, core members, flexible membership, definition of specific responsibilities for team members.

» Confidentiality: clarity and understanding about the appropriate gathering and sharing of information (SST's ethical practice).

» Record keeping: systematic compilation and conservation of all requisite documentation with respect to the work of the SST with due diligence to issues of confidentiality and legal requirements of the Data Protection Acts 1998 and 2003.

» **Determining short-term and long-term goals** to facilitate the work of the team and contribute meaningfully to the functioning of the pastoral system generally

» **Identifying the continued professional development needs** of members of the team. As these needs emerge and are identified, they will be addressed by services such as NEPS, the Special Education Support Service (SESS), CDETB, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), NBSS, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), the Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) service, the Health Services Executive (HSE), TUSLA, etc.

Participating schools were asked to select a member of their Student Support Team to act as their school's Project Leader. In addition, members of each of the three support services were chosen to work with the schools as the external project link person.

School Survey

The first significant action by the Project Team involved the development and dissemination of a school survey to members of teams in each of the participating schools. Survey responses provide a profile of *Specific areas of students' needs that SSTs support as follows:*

Within these categories, respondents were asked to identify approximately how much of their time was required in addressing each of the identified need areas. The needs selected as most frequently addressed by teams were:

Emotional – 89.6%
Behaviour needs – 79.2%
Mental Health needs – 76.4%

COGNITIVE

Basic cognitive ability
Pattern recognition
Processing speed
Memory

Knowledge acquired
Access
Extract
Interpret

Manual capacity to acquire knowledge, thoughts and experience.
Interpret, reflect and extrapolate based on the knowledge acquired.

Knowledge extrapolated
Reflect
Reason
Conceptualise

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL

Achieving
Perseverance
Self-control
Passion for goals

Relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings & behaviours that reflect the tendency to respond in certain ways under certain contexts

Working with others
Friendliness
Respect
Caring

Managing emotions
Calm
Optimism
Confidence

Symbiotic relationship between social, emotional and cognitive learning

Continuing Professional Development

The survey also provided information to allow the process of providing CPD for the participating schools to begin. The first event which addressed mental health, data protection and self-care was held in February 2015.

Potential of the Project

While the primary focus of the project is to support the implementation of the Well-Being Guidelines and to provide for the needs of students with mental health difficulties, there is obvious potential for influencing development of integrated systems for addressing the teaching and learning needs of other students too including those identified with special education needs. The project can potentially be instrumental in supporting a school develop capacity to coordinate and respond to the special education needs of students. We know that there is a symbiotic relationship between social, emotional and cognitive learning as illustrated in the OECD diagram below (OECD, 2014). I can also see a synergy with the exciting work currently in train in City of Dublin ETB on electronic profiling of students' needs.

Neart le chéile

Combining the skills and resources of the three services is an effective way of max-imising scarce resources and ensuring that key messages are coordinated. I would like to thank the project leaders, Paula Dunne and Bridget Egan, Senior Psychologists with NEPS, Mary Keane, and Jean Hefner, Coordinator and Researcher with NBSS, and Caroline Martin, Chief Psychologist, CDETB, and the participating schools for providing us with the opportunity to learn from their experience and participation.

We hope to share further on delivering our professional development plans for 2015 2016.

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The Student Voice: Adding value to second-level school outcomes

By **Craig McHugh**

ISSU President in 2014-15 (Irish Second-Level Students' Union)

Student Voice is a lovely idea, however we must be realistic. For the student voice to deliver on its potential it must amount to much more than tokenism. If student participation is not meaningful, there is little point in it, outside political gain. Ultimately, student voice has the capacity to add real value to school outcomes if it is facilitated and appropriately resourced.

In the last 12 months, young people have played a decisive role in the future of this country. In May, at the time of the Referendum on Marriage Equality, we saw just the kind of power our Irish youth possesses to drive change and inspire those around them. Empowering young people is finally back on the agenda where it belongs. Although I didn't get as much of an opportunity to pitch in to the said Marriage Equality referendum as I would have liked, I did get an opportunity to play a significant role in the development of education policy during my time as ISSU President. During my term I learned not only how a young person giving his/her two cents can inspire the men in suits but I also acquired a greater appreciation of what students genuinely feel should be happening in our education system. Overall, 2014/15 was a year of real progress for the student voice in Ireland. However, in saying that, I realise that our movement has much more to accomplish and many more people to convince about the relevance of the student voice now, and in the future.

Involvement in Junior Cycle discussions

The Department of Education and Skills was keen from day one to have everyone on its side for the roll out of the new JCSA in the autumn of 2014. With that in mind, it made certain that not only were the principals, the teachers, the management bodies and the parents at the discussion table, but that those most directly affected – the students – also had a place at the table. This move was essential to shaping educational reform. After all, students, as much as young people in general, have the right to have their voices heard when it comes to discussing issues concerning them. Involving second-level students in the Junior Cycle reform discussions not only made for more inclusive discussions, it also ensured that those discussions — and their outcomes — would better accommodate the felt needs of the students.

The way in which other stakeholders recognised and respected the student voice was very much appreciated and it sent a strong message to people of my age. We matter and we know that we matter.

> "The way the other stakeholders recognised and respected the student voice was very much appreciated and it sends a strong message to people of my age. We matter and we know that we matter."

However, not all countries are blessed with ministers for education keen to hear from the secondary students' unions, and not all schools have principals who are strong supporters of empowering students. In fact, not all schools in this country are even fortunate enough to have a functioning, democratic student council. This caused

difficulties for ISSU when it was seeking a mandate to support the Junior Cycle reforms.

Student Councils

One of ISSU's clear ambitions when it was formed in 2008 was to establish a national standard for the student voice from the grassroots school-level to national level, and for that standard to be of a significantly high quality. While we have improved the standard of student councils across the country over the course of the last year, the overall standard of meaningful student participation in decision making is well below what we want it to be.

> "In 2014 we argued clearly for the need to move away from terminal assessment and this sparked great debate on the national airwaves and online."

Some schools still lack strong, student-run student councils, while others have past pupils sitting on the board of management and have regular meetings between student council representatives and the school's senior management. This disparity is due to a number of factors involving all parties within a school; and is often reflected in the morale of students and teachers within the institution, as well as in the overall performance of the school community.

Speaking from experience in working with student councils that are respected and well facilitated by the senior staff in the school, I can say that such school communities are cohesive and constantly developing. They also tend to be schools that expand their extracurricular and Transition Year programmes leading to even more possibilities for students both outside the classroom and beyond the completion of the Leaving Certificate. A strong student voice in a school is not only an asset to those students who are active in the student council, it is also of benefit to the general school community – both staff and students. Only a few short years ago many would find it hard to

appreciate that school management and the Department of Education listening to the voice of the student would actually result in better schools and a better education system. But perceptions about this are changing.

Amend the 1998 Education Act

The lack of a strong student voice in all schools should be a cause for real concern for all of us. Indeed, the 1998 Education Act needs to be amended to rectify this situation. The role of student councils deserves to be more proactively recognised in legislation. ISSU is well supported by the Department of Education and Skills and respected by its partners in education. But for the student voice to flourish nationally all schools need to be involved.

Currently, the Education Act (Section 27) provides for the students of a post-primary school establishing a student council and for the board of a post-primary school to encourage the establishment of a student council and to facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to students who wish to establish a student council, and to student councils when they have been established. It also states that 'a student council shall promote the interests of the school and the involvement of students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the board, parents and teachers.' Is it not time to go a step further and mandate the establishment of student councils in all schools?

Student Charter

If students are to be truly treated as equal partners in education, we really need change. After all, workers have the right to collectively organise and assemble at both local and national levels in this country. The time has come for second-level students to be given a similar entitlement in the context of an agreed student charter.

Resources needed

Students in second-level education do not have the resources to fund an organisation to represent them while those employed in the education sector do. This means that teachers are able to have their collective

voices articulated in an organised fashion beyond the student movement's dreams. There is, of course, nothing wrong with teacher unions and those employed in the education sector organising for change, and we in the student movement not only respect and encourage it but are inspired by it. We would like to be able to do likewise but to do so we need to be resourced – both at a school and national level. We have just as much to say about the direction of education policy and practice but without appropriately resourced student councils in every school and a properly resourced national organisation, we will always struggle to formulate our views and to have our voice heard. ISSU believes that students have a very valuable contribution to make towards reforming our education system and that a strong, coherent student voice will make for a better school system for staff and students alike.

> "If students are to be truly treated as equal partners in education we really need change."

Student Voice expanding

Despite the challenges we face, ISSU, as the official platform for the second-level student voice, is growing every day and we are constantly developing new strategies for growing our membership. Our ever-changing student led executive elects new members every year to ensure that fresh ideas are at the top of our agenda. With strong relationships with all the major education unions and management bodies as well as the Department itself, we are slowly but surely building a sustainable platform for students to have their say. In 2014 we argued clearly for the need to move away from terminal assessment and this sparked great debate on the national airwaves and online – a debate that involved all education partners. This provided us with an opportunity to profile the contribution that students can make to the national debate about the future of our education system and helped greatly in attracting new members to our student voice movement. This year,

hopefully as we reach a national consensus about the reform of Junior Cycle education, we support the calls of our partners in education to protect the funding of vital education services and institutions such as career guidance. We also support those calling for the roll out of a more affordable Higher Education model. It is clearly in the best interest of our members and in the best interest of Irish society if the 2016 budget treats education as it should be treated: a fundamental human right that needs to be appropriately funded. Currently education is seriously underfunded when we have regard for international comparisons.

Students want 'change for the better'

Right now, what do students want? Change for the better. That's for certain. And I think having students in a school wanting to improve matters is one of the best things a school's management could ask for. It means that the school has done its job well, that we, as students have the capacity to think for ourselves; and that we care about the future of the school and want it to thrive so that it can inspire and support those who come after us to make the most of their potential. Appropriately facilitated and respected, the student voice will always call for the system being improved.

The possibilities for improving our second-level school system are as endless as our imaginations, our commitment, and our capacity to work together with the other partners in education. The future is certainly bright and exciting. But only when we listen to everyone will we get to where we need to and deserve to get.

New model of allocating resources to schools

By **John Irwin**

Assistant General Secretary of the Association of
Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS)

 *"A child with special educational needs shall be
educated in an inclusive environment with chil-
dren who do not have such needs.*

This statement is taken from Section 2 of
the Education of Persons with Special Edu-
cational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. There are
exclusions if the severity of need is such
that the best interests of the child are not
met by being educated with peers or where
the presence of such a child in a main-
stream class negatively affects provision to
other students.

> **"The effective implementation of
> this guidance can only be achieved
> if schools are funded to appoint
> someone with an appropriate skill
> set to manage and lead this work."**

This is the legislative background that in-
forms the inclusion policy of the Depart-
ment of Education and Skills (DES). In the
last decade, there has been a significant in-
crease in the funding of special education,
both in Ireland and internationally, and
this has spawned a debate regarding the ef-
fectiveness of this funding.

'The situation concerning funding for spe-
cial needs education can be characterised as
in flux both in Ireland and internationally'[1].
This backdrop framed the research and sub-
sequent policy advice of the National Coun-
cil for Special Education (NCSE) to the DES
regarding the development of a new model
for allocating resources to mainstream
schools to meet the needs of students with

special educational needs. The new model
proposes significant changes and will have
implications for schools.

Why change?
At post primary level the proposed change
evolved from the development of a General
Allocation Model (GAM) at primary level.
Following on from this, an interim arrange-
ment in post primary schools emerged
whereby the 'high incidence' special needs
allocation to schools was based on the al-
location they received in previous years.
The single greatest flaw in this GAM mod-
el, where the resources are granted to the
school and the school deploys them, is that
it does not take account of students' needs.
This is in conflict with the aim of the NCSE
which states that, 'In developing this policy
advice, we are conscious that meeting stu-
dents' identified educational needs was the
paramount consideration which must be
kept to the centre of proposals and recom-
mendations'.

> **"...where test results are used
> to determine efficacy, improved
> outcomes may result in the
> resources allocated to a school being
> reduced. This has the potential to
> disincentivise rather than incentivise
> schools to use allocated resources
> well."**

The proposed change
The proposed new model, which is cur-
rently being piloted in some 50 schools (30
primary and 20 post primary) is based on

the 'educational profile' of the school. The components of this profile include:

» A baseline allocation to each school
» An allocation for students with complex needs
» Consideration of attainment in literacy and numeracy
» The social context of the school
» The gender balance in the school

Students with 'complex needs' will be identified through diagnostic reports and it is believed the vast majority of students in this category will have been identified in primary school. Attainment in literacy and numeracy will be assessed on scores in standardised tests in primary school and performance in English and Mathematics at Junior Certificate level. The social context was initially to be assessed through a survey completed by schools but will now be based on the number of students who qualify for a waiver of fees for the Junior Certificate examinations. A small proportion of the allocation will be based on the gender composition of the school's enrolment as research has shown a higher level of need amongst male students.

Implementation

The new model attempts to combine the best elements of a 'through put' model while taking account of educational outcomes in schools. In a 'through put' model, resources are allocated to schools and the schools deploy the resources as they deem appropriate to meet the needs of individual students. In this context, however, it is important to note the comments of Banks et al, who caution that such an approach may result in an 'implementation gap' where there are 'discrepancies between policy intentions and school practices on the ground'. In increasing autonomy to school principals, there is an assumption that they will deliver national objectives of inclusion. Circular letter CL 70/2014 provides guidance to schools on the deployment and organisation of teaching resources for students who need additional teaching resources, on the identification of students requiring 'high-incidence' and 'low-incidence' learning support, on the deployment of teaching resources, on the development of a whole school response to meeting the needs of students with special educational needs, and the roles of school staff in implementing this guidance.

However, the effective implementation of this guidance can only be achieved if schools are funded to appoint someone with an appropriate skill set to manage and lead this work. Otherwise, principals and deputy principals will have their current unconscionable workloads further increased, scarce resources will be wasted, and students with special education needs will not have those needs met.

International research suggests that a 'through put' model of allocation can lead to inactivity or inertia in schools as the resource will be provided irrespective of the quality of provision[2]. The new model proposes using educational outcomes (standardised test and state examination results) to evaluate outcomes. This establishes an element of accountability but also has unintended negative consequences. For example, where test results are used to determine efficacy, improved outcomes may result in the resources allocated to a school being reduced. This has the potential to disincentivise rather than incentivise schools to use allocated resources well.

Co-ordination in schools

Circular letter 70/2014 stresses the importance of:

» Identification process
» Whole school planning
» Educational planning
» The development of individual education plans for students
» SEN record for students
» Regular reviews of progress and ongoing consultation with relevant teachers, parents, professionals and the students themselves.

It also states that 'the teacher with this coordinating role should have accessed professional development and attained a

recognised qualification in special education', and that 'schools should ensure the additional teaching resources are used in their entirety to support students identified with special educational needs, ***including the conducting of co-ordination activities***'. Thus, while the need for a teacher with an appropriate skill set to coordinate a school's special education needs support system is acknowledged, it leaves it to school principals to decide what proportion of the school's SEN resources should be diverted for coordination. In effect, principals are asked to deprive their most needy students of learning supports in order to resource administration.

If we want the new model to work to the maximum benefit of the target students, each school must be resourced to appoint an Inclusion Co-ordinator. Since the SEN allocation differs significantly across schools, the quantum of the Inclusion Coordinator post should also differ. The table below proposes an equitable approach to relating the quantum of such a post to the special education needs hours allocated to a school.

be fully explored. One such tool, the 'Do IT Profiler'[3], currently being piloted in a number of educational contexts by City of Dublin ETB, is of particular interest. This web-based tool, being used in a range of educational contexts (third-level colleges, schools and prisons) in the UK, has the capacity to screen learners to identify their specific special educational needs, provide specific guidance to those providing specific supports to those identified with such needs, and track their progress over time. This makes for the efficient identification of those with special education needs and ensures that their needs are specifically responded to rather than that they are given some kind of generalised educational support. There is a strong case for this kind of technology being deployed in Irish Schools in the context of the new allocation model being implemented.

Inclusion of students with special educational needs in schools underpins educational policy and practice in Ireland. The funding of inclusion has increased substantially and the NCSE has undertaken valuable research on how best to utilise this

Resource Teaching Hours weekly	<22	22-44	44-88	88-132	132-176	176-220	220-264	>264
Coordination hours	1	2	4	6	8	10	12	14

A relevant professional allowance recognising the responsibility and qualification of the teacher co-ordinating the process in a school also needs to be considered. If we want to guarantee the sustainability of current best practice in schools, we must have a person in each school with responsibility for driving the inclusion agenda.

The use of technology
The use of technology tools to assist in the process of identifying and tracking students with special education needs should

funding. The current pilot on the allocation of additional teaching resources in schools is a significant development and the outcomes of the pilot are awaited with interest.

"A relevant professional allowance recognising the responsibility and qualification of the teacher co-ordinating the process in a school also needs to be considered."

1. Achieving inclusion? Effective resourcing of students with special educational needs, Joanne Banks, Denise Frawley and Selina McCoy, ESRI, June 2014
2. https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/special-education-across-europe-in-2003_special_education_europe.pdf
3. http://doitprofiler.com/

'Fitness to Teach' and Complaints against Registered Teachers:
Commencement of Part 5 of the Teaching Council Acts 2001-2015

By **Finola O'Dwyer**

Solicitor, Professional Standards Officer, The Teaching Council

Introduction

The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for teaching, responsible for promoting and regulating the teaching profession. It acts in the public interest while upholding and enhancing the reputation and status of the profession.

The commencement of Part 5 [Fitness to Teach] of the Teaching Council Acts, 2001 to 2015 represents a major step forward for the teaching profession as there will now be a mechanism for investigating complaints regarding registered teachers, which the Teaching Council will be legally required to investigate.

Teaching impacts on the lives of every single person in our society every day in a way that no other profession does. That is why professional standards matter so much and this is why it is vital that a formal mechanism exists to allow for the investigation of complaints.

Under the legislation, any person including employers, other teachers and members of the public may make a complaint about a registered teacher. In addition, the Teaching Council can itself make a complaint about a registered teacher.

Grounds of Complaint

Complaints can be made on one or more of the grounds set out in the legislation. The grounds include professional misconduct, poor professional performance, a teacher being medically unfit to teach and, in certain circumstances, convictions.

Section 24 and section 28 procedures

In most circumstances, the Teaching Council cannot look into a complaint unless school disciplinary or grievance procedures (established under sections 24 and 28 of the Education Act, 1998) have been exhausted.

The Investigating Committee of the Teaching Council must refuse the complaint if the school's disciplinary procedures (established under section 24 of the Education Act, 1998) have not come to an end unless there are good and sufficient reasons to proceed with investigating the complaint e.g. a child protection issue. If and when procedures are prescribed by the Minister under section 28 of the Education Act, 1998, the Teaching Council will not normally look into a complaint until those procedures have been exhausted unless there are good and sufficient reasons.

In the absence of section 28 procedures, if there are alternative school complaints procedures being progressed, the Committee is not obliged to refuse the complaint. However, the Committee could choose to pause its investigation until the conclusion of local school complaint procedures.

Overview of the Process

When a complaint is received by the Teaching Council, the Director of the Teaching Council is obliged to do a preliminary review to confirm whether it will progress to the Investigating Committee. The Director must assess whether complaints are signed and in writing and must also consider whether a complaint is frivolous, vexatious, made in bad faith or is an abuse of process. A complainant can appeal a refusal by the

Director to the Investigating Committee of the Teaching Council.

Once a complaint has been referred to the Investigating Committee by the Director, the Committee must decide whether it will investigate the matter or not. There are a number of instances where the Committee may refuse to investigate a complaint, for example, if it believes that the complaint does not relate to the teacher's fitness to teach or the school's disciplinary procedures (established under section 24 of the Education Act, 1998) have not been exhausted (unless there are good and sufficient reasons for proceeding to consider the complaint). The Investigating Committee may also refuse to consider a complaint if the matters complained about took place before the commencement of Part 5 but there are some exceptions.

If the Investigating Committee decides to proceed to investigate a complaint, it has various powers under the legislation for gathering information. Where the Investigating Committee has a bona fide concern of harm or risk of potential harm to a child or vulnerable person, the committee is obliged to notify the employer of that teacher where the identity of the employer is known to the Teaching Council.

Once the Committee has carried out its investigations and gathered the necessary information, it must decide whether the matter is sufficiently serious, and that there is sufficient evidence, to refer the complaint to the Disciplinary Committee for the purposes of holding an inquiry.

If an oral Hearing takes place, it will be heard in public unless a witness or the teacher the subject of the inquiry applies to have some or all of the hearing heard in private. This is up to the discretion of the Panel.

If, at the end of an inquiry, the Panel finds that the facts are proven against a teacher beyond a reasonable doubt and that those facts amount to one of the grounds of referral to the Disciplinary Committee, then the Panel makes 'a finding' against the teacher and they set out what they find the teacher guilty of.

The inquiry Panel must then decide what sanction is appropriate and proportionate in the circumstances. Sanctions under the legislation range from advising, admonishing or censuring the teacher, to conditions being attached to a teacher's registration, suspension from the register or removal from the register.

The sanctions of conditions, suspension and removal can be appealed to the High Court. If no appeal is made by the teacher, the High Court must confirm the sanction in the case of conditions, suspension or removal. An employer must be notified within 21 days of a decision in relation to sanction by the inquiry Panel and the employer must be advised of the reasons for that decision. Where no finding is made against a teacher, the case is dismissed and the Panel is obliged to inform the employer also.

The Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers

The Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers serves as a guiding compass to teachers throughout their career. It is a statutory document and will also act as a reference point during 'Fitness to Teach' inquiries. The Code sets out the standards of professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct which are expected of registered teachers. Conduct contrary to the Code is another ground of complaint under the legislation.

Obligations on Employers to provide information

Employers are required to provide certain information to the Council where a registered teacher is dismissed by the employer or where they resign in connection with a school's disciplinary procedure. An employer must notify the Council as soon as possible after such a resignation or dismissal regardless of any ongoing employment appeals process.

Immediate suspension from the Register

In certain, very serious, circumstances, the Council can apply to the High Court to suspend a teacher's registration immediately on an interim basis (pending the determination of the disciplinary process). In these instances, however, the Council must be satisfied that such a High Court Order is required in the public interest.

Conclusion

In a 1960 administration of justice case involving the Law Society, a High Court Judge said "A professions' most valuable asset is its collective reputation and the confidence which that inspires". The commencement of Part 5 represents a major step forward for the teaching profession as there will now be a mechanism for investigating complaints.

This will assist the profession in upholding the reputation and standards of the teaching profession in Ireland.

Further guidance on 'Fitness to Teach' can be found on www.teachingcouncil.ie, in particular employers should be familiar with the 'Information for Employers' booklet in the Professional Standards section of the Teaching Council website which will be available on commencement of Part 5 of the Teaching Council Acts. This had not happened at the time of writing but was imminent.

Complaints to the Teaching Council should be submitted on an official complaint form. Once Part 5 is commenced, the complaint form will be available for download from the Professional Standards section of www.teachingcouncil.ie

Another busy year for National Parents' Council post-primary

By **Don Myers**

President of the National Parents' Council post primary

An introductory meeting at the beginning of the school year with Minister for Education & Skills, Ms. Jan O' Sullivan TD, provided us with an excellent opportunity to give our new minister a practical insight into the work of the National Parents' Council post-primary. The meeting proved to be very positive and it was only one of many encounters with the Minister over the course of the year.

Training Programme

An abiding ambition that I have had since becoming President of NPCpp has been the establishment by the Council of a team of facilitators to deliver training to parents and parent associations, parent/teacher associations, etc. This became a reality at the end of September 2014 when we trained 10 facilitators from across the country. This training programme has now delivered 65 training sessions into over 75 schools. For us this is a great achievement. We are currently in the process of taking on a further 10 facilitators and it is our goal to be equally successful next year.

Junior Cycle reform

The New Junior Cycle has been on all agendas in the last year and, for the first time in Irish history, the NPCpp and the ISSU issued a joint statement in November 2014 supporting the reform programme. The focus of the NPCpp annual conference in November was also largely on the New Junior Cycle and on informing parents about what the programme would mean for them, their sons and daughters. In December, the teachers' strike led to considerable media coverage of NPCpp's views on Junior Cycle reform, but ultimately the impasse remained and the reform programme was left in a kind of limbo. This caused great unease for parents, particularly those with children entering second-level the following September. The second day of strike action by teachers on January 22 caused further anxiety, this time especially for parents who had sons and daughters preparing for state examinations. Shortly afterwards, Minister O'Sullivan announced that she was moving ahead with the Junior Cycle reform programme and this development upped the ante further.

Guidance Counselling

NPCpp attended the Institute of Guidance Counsellors' conference in Waterford which was a great success. We have always been great supporters of guidance counsellors and the great work they do in our schools and there is no doubt that guidance counselling in schools needs to be better resourced if the needs of young people are to be appropriately met. We know that many young people go through difficult periods in their mid-teens and it is critical that they are properly supported through those difficulties. Otherwise their personal and academic development will be stalled and this will have serious implications for the young people themselves, their families, and – in the longer term - the State.

Teacher Unions

As President of NPCpp, I attended both the ASTI and TUI conferences over the Easter break. Then, in mid-April, NPCpp arranged separate meetings with the teachers unions and the DES. A delegation from NPCpp attended both meetings and relayed the message to both parties that we parents wanted

to see a resolution to the impasse on the New Junior Cycle before the start of the new school year in September 2015–16. At the time we felt that the issue needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency as parents and students were unsure of what would happen if no solution could be found. Be it coincidence or pure luck, a breakthrough emerged very soon afterwards.

A working holiday
While the summer holidays might be expected to be a period of little activity, they were far from this for NPCpp which relocated its office from Ballyboggan Rd, Finglas to the OMNI Shopping Centre in Santry during that period. We are delighted with the move to the more spacious, functional, and brighter premises. The Leaving Certificate results were released on August 12 and NPCpp held the Leaving Certificate Helpline in our new premises. This year's helpline was the busiest and most successful in the history of the service. 3,381 calls were received and a grand total of 13,476 queries were received and answered – well up on the previous year when 2,660 calls were received and 4,978 queries answered. In this regard, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Lynda O' Shea, the NPCpp PRO, who co-ordinated the helpline and all those who worked behind the scenes. Also I would like to pay a special tribute to the members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors who answered all the calls and queries so professionally.

Voluntary contributions
There has been a very noticeable increase this year in the number of schools looking for voluntary contributions. Indeed, the old 'voluntary contribution' is being reconfigured and, in some instances, renamed as the 'necessary contribution', or something along these lines. The cost of school books, uniforms, and other expenditures required of families at the beginning of the school year is continuously on the rise. In the current economic climate, many parents simply cannot afford these charges. On the other hand, schools require appropriate funding to ensure that they can deliver a quality education service to their students. The time has come for a national conversation about how our schools should be funded so that all schools can deliver on their remit.

Conclusion
I am now in my final days as President of NPCpp. I have completed my three year term and it has been a privilege to have held this position. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my fellow directors of NPCpp and also thank all our partners in education whom I have worked with. I wish all well but most of all I wish that, going forward, our children will receive the best education possible – an education that will make them the best and most fulfilled citizens in the world. We have always been proud of our Irish education system and long may that last.

The youth of today are the adults and leaders of the future. I will leave you with my motto:

> *If I can help one person it is good. If I can help more than one person it is great. But if I can help all people well then it is a success.*

NAPD Conference 2015: leading the way

Full house at NAPD conference

NAPD's sixteenth annual conference took place in the Radisson Hotel Galway at a time when all the economic signals are pointing to the fact that Ireland has emerged from recession and the challenge now is to safeguard and nurture economic recovery. The theme engaging over 550 delegates was **Leadership for Growth requires a Growth in Leadership**. NAPD sees leadership and the need to continuously invest in leadership as the key in keeping our education system remains fit for purpose.

The establishment of the Centre for School Leadership, a partnership between the Department of Education and Skills, the Irish Primary Principals Network and NAPD is a concrete recognition of the need to invest in leadership as was highlighted as a major innovation by NAPD President, Mary Nihill, Director, Clive Byrne and Minister O'Sullivan in their various addresses to Conference. Mary Nihill has been appointed Director of the new centre and will work with Deputy Directors, Máire Ní Bhróithe (post-primary) and Anna-Mai Rooney (primary), as they begin their work to support and sustain school leaders.

There was a change in format this year which meant that for the first time in three years, **Director Clive Byrne** addressed the delegates and not by way of a response to the Minister. He highlighted the characteristics of an effective school leader, posed searching questions on what we as a society want from our education system, possible changes required and the systemic barriers to enable change. There was extensive comment on what it means for a teacher to be a professional, on the need for evidence of involvement with continuous professional development to maintain registration with the Teaching Council and on the need to review the teaching contract to reflect 21st century teaching, learning and work practices.

Mary Nihill's presidential address was a tour de force. Among the highlights was her description of a typical day in her life as principal which really resonated with delegates and indicated the many and varied roles and responsibilities of the second level school leader.

Mary Nihill addressing the conference

Minister Jan O'Sullivan T.D. spoke of how good it was to address school leaders in the context of a recovering economy and delegates welcomed the additional supports proposed at

deputy principal level and also the alleviation to support improved guidance services to school.

NAPD always has an impressive line-up of speakers and this year **Prof Brian MacCraith**, President of Dublin City University, gave a far reaching address on the Irish education system and suggested potential areas for reform and review particularly around transitions from post-primary to third level.

Poet, writer and broadcaster **Theo Dorgan** spoke of the magic that can occur in a school or in a classroom when an artist or writer visits. The power and enchantment that creativity can unleash were

Brian Mac Craith

core to his presentation as was his challenge to school principals to make this happen.

Prof Toby Salt

Professor Toby Salt from the Ormiston Academies Trust, and former Director of the College for Leadership in the United Kingdom, spoke of the need to invest in leadership and to support school leaders in situ with appropriate CPD. Failure to do so will undermine curriculum reform and lead to a loss in morale which will have a profoundly negative effect on our education system. He made a strong case for changes at middle leadership level to encourage a pride in the profession and to instil in all teachers that leadership occurs in every classroom.

Dr Philip Matthews, President of the National College of Ireland and former Irish rugby captain gave an informative and entertaining keynote highlighting the qualities of emotional intelligence – be strategic but make sure to develop intimate personal relationships was a key message with a witty interlude concerning the power of the hug.

The Friday afternoon workshop sessions were a highlight again this year. Delegates attended presentations on Teacher Induction, Further Education, Resilience in Leadership, Internet Safety, Straitéisí Ceistneoireachta sna Gaelcholáistí, Leading Learning and Coping with Workplace challenges in the IR area.

The conference concluded with a Gala Dinner where delegates were entertained by musicians, singers and dancers from Calasanctius

Luke Monaghan leading the workshop on Resilience in Leadership

College, Oranmore. During the dinner the chain of office passed from Mary Nihill (good luck in your new role as Director of the Centre for School Leadership Mary) to Paul Byrne, Deputy Principal of Carrick-on- Shannon, who takes on the Presidency of NAPD for the coming year.

Three European Presidents

Dr. Padraig Walsh
President of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

The Chief Executive of QQI, Dr Padraig Walsh, was first elected to the Board of ENQA in 2011 and was elected President in 2013. He was re-elected President in 2014 for a three year term. ENQA was founded in 2000 and its secretariat is based in Brussels. ENQA is the umbrella body for quality assurance agencies operating in Europe. In 2015, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) adopted revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG). All 47 countries in the EHEA and their higher education institutions are expected to work to these standards. This requires higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to be subject to regular external evaluations. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) underwent such an evaluation in 2014. QQI will host the annual ENQA General Assembly in Dublin in October 2015.

Michael Moriarty
President of the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE)

Michael Moriarty, general secretary of ETBI, was elected President of the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) in March 2014. EFEE was established in 2009 to represent the interests of education employers at all levels of education across Europe. As a recognised European Social Dialogue Partner in Education, EFEE is officially consulted by the European Commission on future EU priorities for education, education policy development, labour issues within the education sector, and related matters such as social inclusion, lifelong learning and mobility. EFEE also facilitates access to a range of networks, international projects and funding for EFEE members. This connection stimulates the valuable exchange of knowledge and best practice among member countries.

Clive Byrne
President of the European School Heads Association (ESHA)

Clive Byrne, director of NAPD, was elected president of the European School Heads Association in October 2014. The European School Heads Association (ESHA) is comprised of national organisations for school heads and deputy school heads within primary, secondary and vocational education in Europe. Nearly all European countries (both EU and non-EU) are represented within ESHA.

The aims for ESHA include:

» discussing and developing views within the ESHA-membership on school leadership,
» identifying best practice in innovative education,
» influencing the policy of the European Commission,
» promoting international exchange and cooperation,
» emphasising the particular role of the school head and promoting conditions that improve the quality of school leadership,
» building a European leadership network,

ESHA organises a General Assembly for all member associations twice a year, supports at least two regional conferences and organises one major conference every two years, the next one is in Maastricht in October 2016. The ESHA website is www.esha.org. The ESHA magazine is published at www.eshamagazine.com.

Pictured Left to right: **Cllr. Donál Lyons**; **Paul Stewart**, *Stewart Building Contractors Cody Partnership*; **Brenda Gaughan**, *GRETB Buildings Dept*; **Enda Kelly**, *Stewart Building Contractors*; **Cllr. Niall McNelis**, **Joan Kilcommins**; *GRETB Human Rescouces*; **Tomás Mac Phaidín**, *GRETB Education Officer*; **John O'Donnell**, *GRETB IT Dept*; **Aoife De Bhaldraithe**, *GRETB Buildings Dept*; **Geraldine Ní Chualáin**, *Príomhoide Tánaisteach, Coláiste na Coiribe*; **Charlotte Quinn**; **Margaret Hardiman**, *GRETB Buildings Dept*; **Stiofán Ó Cualáin**, *Príomhoide Gníomhach, Coláiste na Coiribe.*

Coláiste na Coiribe on the move

In October 2015, Coláiste na Coiribe relocated to a brand new school facility in Ballyburke, Knocknacarra, Galway.

In temporary accommodation for over 20 years, the school now benefits from state-of-the-art facilities and will continue to provide its traditional high standard of Irish-medium education in Galway city. The new school is designed for 720 students and will be the largest Gaelcholáiste in the country when it is at full capacity.

FÉILTE: Celebrating Teachers

More than 1,200 teachers and members of the public attended FÉILTE at the RDS Dublin, on October 4th 2015, to celebrate innovation in teaching and learning for World Teachers' Day 2015. Hosted by the Teaching Council, the day featured a mix of over 50 showcases and workshops spanning projects from across the education sector, as well as panel discussions on well-being in the classroom, technology in education, and parental involvement in their children's education.

Tomás Ó Ruairc, *Director of the Teaching Council (left) with Minister for Education and Skills* **Jan O'Sullivan** *TD and* **Micheal Ó Gríofa**, *Chairperson of the Teaching Council (right), pictured at the FÉILTE gathering at the RDS Dublin on October 4th 2015. Photo: Conor McCabe*

First ever Irish study on Children's Independent Mobility

Dr. Brendan O'Keeffe and Alanna O'Beirne, lecturers at Mary Immaculate College Limerick, co-authored the report on children's level of freedom to make journeys on their own.

Pictured at the launch of the report in March 2015 were: Minister for Education & Skills **Jan O'Sullivan** *(with bicycle); College President* **Prof Michael Hayes**, *and report co-authors* **Alanna O'Beirne** *and* **Dr Brendan O'Keeffe**.

Pictured at the Conference were: Professor **Diane J Tedick**, *University of Minnesota, USA; Conference organiser* **Dr TJ Ó Ceallaigh**, *Department of Language, Literacy and Numeracy Education, MIC,* **Professor Tara W Fortune**, *University of Minnesota, USA; and* **Professor Muiris Ó Laoire**, *Institute of Technology Tralee.*

Inaugural all-Ireland Research Conference on Immersion Education

The All-Ireland Research Conference on Immersion Education held in Mary Immaculate College Limerick on 15-16 May 2015 was the first of its kind in Ireland. It brought together several home-based organisations including An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG); Gaelscoileanna Teoranta; Foras na Gaeilge and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, as well as over 200 delegates from abroad representing nine different countries.

chapter 4 | **Further Education & Training**

Chapter 4   **Contents**

The Further Education and Training sector: Evolution and impact over the course of the year

By **Bryan Fields**
Director, Further Education and Training Strategy
and Skills and Labour Market Research

'Mind the Gap'

There is a strong association between a person's education/training history and their employment outcomes[1], participation in lifelong learning[2], levels of civic engagement[3] and quality of life and individual well-being[4]. All of the good work that has taken place in 2015 to fully integrate the 'FE' and the 'T' – and it is substantial – is aimed at improving learner access and outcomes for all who will engage in FET so that they too can fulfil their potential and meet their career, employment, personal or developmental aspirations. The FET Strategy[5] points the way forward. Although the timeframe is undoubtedly very ambitious, all FET partners are working assiduously to progress the Strategy. This strikes an optimistic note for the future of FET.

> "The quality and relevance of FET is under scrutiny."

FET under scrutiny

According to George Bernard Shaw, "both optimists and pessimists contribute to society. The optimist invents the aeroplane; the pessimist, the parachute". Recent analyses by the European Commission and the OECD[6], regarding improvements in the Irish labour market, emphasise both 'aeroplane' and 'parachute' perspectives. On the one hand, there has been a reduction in unemployment and increased job creation in the private sector. On the other, long term unemployment remains a serious issue, skill mismatches are evident and youth unemployment levels are higher than before the downturn. The quality and relevance of FET is under scrutiny.

> "…Some commentators speculated in 2015 that the Strategy is bound to fail because… key inhibitors such as existing work practices are so institutionalised that they are bound to block any meaningful execution of Strategy."

Ready to pull the ripcord, some commentators speculated in 2015 that the Strategy is bound to fail not because the analysis underpinning it is inherently weak or that it is pointing the sector in the wrong direction but that key inhibitors such as existing work practices are so institutionalised that they are bound to block any meaningful execution of Strategy. On the contrary, the assessment in this chapter of Dr John Sweeney is nearer the mark in that more is underway in the sector than is being blocked. Citing an example of the first ever integrated 'FE' and 'T' services planning exercise jointly undertaken in 2014/2015 by SOLAS and the Education and Training Board (ETB) sector, Dr Sweeney notes that the allocation of funding to ETBs is now based to a large extent on identified local learner, community and employer needs rather than based on past funding allocations.

Regional Skills Fora

The establishment of an integrated 'whole of education' network of regional skills fora in 2015 under the direction of the Department of Education and Skills is another prominent development. Anne Ford of the Department of Education and Skills acknowledges that there are many excellent

examples of current collaboration with enterprise by education bodies, many in FET, but a more systematic and integrated approach is now required. This is the overriding aim of the fora with particular focus on strengthening links between education and training providers in coordinating, planning and delivering programmes.

ETBI-QQI Collaborative Forum

With regard to quality, Marie Gould of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) notes the national and European context for QA in FET and the five core pillars of an integrated ETB Quality Assurance Framework for the ETB sector. During 2014/2015 an ETBI-QQI Collaborative Forum was established, as a first step in the development and implementation of a new integrated ETB QA Framework.

> "Improving data and referral systems were noted during 2015… When fully operational, the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) is expected to enable better sharing of data within FET and across the education sector and other Government Departments."

Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS)

Improving data and referral systems were also noted during 2015. Fiona Maloney of ETBI captures the keynote emphasis of much of the work of ETBI and SOLAS namely, to develop and put in place an integrated 'fit for purpose' FET data infrastructure. When fully operational, the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS)[7] is expected to enable better sharing of data within FET and across the education sector and other Government Departments.

Addressing problem of mismatch

Jasmina Behan of the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS makes a strong case for aligning initial further education and training more closely to particular occupations and tasks demanded in the labour market to address the problem of mismatch, often seen as a contributing factor to unemployment[8]. Understanding how successful learners have been in finding employment, or progressing to further or higher education, are likely to be good indicators of the relevance and quality of many full time FET programmes. There is already a lot of very useful information published regularly by the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN)[9] which is assisting FET providers in this regard.

Review of the National PLC programme

On the theme of evidence-based decision making, the ESRI has been commissioned by SOLAS to undertake a review of the National PLC programme. This is currently underway and is expected to be completed in the first half of 2016. Staffing and other issues that may arise from this review and from the ongoing programme of FET integration will be addressed in consultation with staff and other stakeholders.

Significant progress made in implementing FET Strategy

During 2015 a Department of Education and Skills-led FET Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC)[10] reported significant progress with regard to the fifty two actions as set out in a comprehensive strategy implementation plan to ensure that the Strategy does 'what it says on the tin'. Caitriona Murphy of SOLAS discusses progress made during 2015 with implementing the FET Strategy. Some notable examples include the development of the National Skills Strategy (NSS) which is expected to be finalised later in the year. Protocols are now in place between the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) while new career traineeships in hospitality and engineering are being developed by SOLAS in conjunction with ETBs.

> "Understanding how successful learners have been in finding employment, or progressing to further or higher education, are likely to be good indicators of the relevance and quality of many full time FET programmes."

There were significant developments also with regard to Apprenticeship.

Dr Mary Liz-Trant of SOLAS notes that a major review of the twenty-five existing apprenticeships is progressing well. Work to further develop twenty five of the eighty-six proposals received by the National Apprenticeship Council is also progressing. However, challenges remain, not least how to prevent the development of a two tier apprenticeship system, one tier perceived for higher education and training and another for further education and training.

SOLAS eCollege

In his article, Michael Mooney of SOLAS eCollege, focusses on the increased attractiveness and use of online learning. Citing eCollege[11], as an example, a key advantage of on-line learning is that it can offer access to training when, where, and at a pace that suits the individual learner. With almost instant access to eCollege for learners, it offers flexible course start dates, features that are particularly important for job-seeker clients of the Department of Social Protection.

National Learner Forum

Building on the learner-centred theme above, Karen Williams of AONTAS emphasises that learners are at the heart of FET and 'working with' learners is more productive than 'working for' learners. Preparatory work on the establishment of a National Learner Forum took place in 2015. The new SOLAS quantitative data infrastructure (PLSS) will be strongly enriched and balanced by qualitative data harvested thorough the Learner Forum.

Conclusion

In summary, there has been notable progress in 2015 in enabling the transformation of the FET sector. There is no doubt that significant gaps remain. The need for further institutional reform, the lack of a coherent data infrastructure, particularly on FET learner outcomes, the need to ensure that FET provision remains relevant to the evolving needs of learners and the local economy and the need for a more integrated FET guidance service come to mind. The key focus of the FET Strategy implementation plan at this stage is to ensure that the strengths of the sector in terms of flexibility, diversity, reach and social inclusion are further enhanced while at the same time the sector is enabled to respond with relevant and 'in-demand' education and training programmes to meet the diverse aspirations of FET learners.

1. See for example OECD Skills Outlook 2015 Youth, Skills and Employment'. Also 'Improving skills for more and better jobs: Does training make a difference?' OECD. http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/34846890.pdf
2. Lifelong Learning among Adults in Ireland, Quarter 4, 2014. SMLRU/EGFSN. See also OECD (2013), Education at a Glance 2013: Also OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills.
3. Dee, T., 'Are there civic returns to education?' National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts in Journal of Public Economics Volume 88, August 2004.
4. 'Expert group on future funding for higher education. The role, value and scale of higher education in Ireland' Discussion paper for Stakeholder Consultation 2015.
5. Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf
6. Council Recommendation on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion on the Stability Programme, European Commission, May 2015. OECD Economic Survey of Ireland September 2015.
7. Developed by SOLAS in collaboration with the ETB sector, the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) will consist of a FET National Courses Calendar, A National Course Database and National FET Learner Database.
8. "The right skills for the job? Rethinking training policies for workers." World Bank, 2012.
9. For example, annual publications such as the 'National Skills Bulletin', 'Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply', 'Annual Vacancy Overview' and 'Regional Labour Market Bulletin'. Also EGFSN Sectoral Reports for example 'A Study of the Current and Future Skills Requirements of the Marine/Maritime Economy to 2020' (April 2015), 'Addressing the Demand for Skills in the Freight Transport, Distribution and Logistics Sector in Ireland 2015 – 2020' (February 2015).
10. Incorporating for example representatives from DES, ETBI, DSP, DPER, QQI, SOLAS, Employer bodies, AONTAS, NALA and the National Centre for Guidance in Education.
11. SOLAS-managed national online course delivery system. See www.eCollege.ie for more details.

Implementation of the Further Education and Training Strategy

By **Caitriona Murphy**

Project Manager at the SOLAS Programme Office

The first Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy was formally approved by the Minister of Education and Skills in April 2014. It provides a framework for the continued development of a strong integrated Education and Training sector. The aim of the FET Strategy is to deliver a higher quality learning experience that will lead to better outcomes for all those who engage in Further Education and Training in order to support the Government's economic and social priorities.

The emphasis within the FET Strategy is equally focussed on meeting the skills needs of the economy **and** increasing active inclusion. A recent OECD study supports this approach. *Without the right combination of skills, people can end up on the margins of society and with the type of mediocre technological progress that fails to translate into the type of economic growth that benefits all citizens[1].*

There are five key goals in the FET Strategy including:

>> *Skills for the Economy*
>> *Active Inclusion*
>> *Quality Provision*
>> *Integrated Planning and Funding*
>> *Standing of FET*

The five goals have been broken down into 52 separate, yet interlinked, actions and are set out in a detailed FET Strategy Implementation Plan. This plan sets out the specific actions assigned to eight lead partners and their associated timelines for these actions. The lead partners are SOLAS; the Department of Education and Skills; Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI);

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI); Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (DJEI); Higher Education Authority (HEA); AONTAS; and Department of Social Protection (DSP).

> "The emphasis within the FET Strategy is equally focussed on meeting the skills needs of the economy and increasing active inclusion."

Implementation

The implementation phase of the FET Strategy commenced in October 2014 with the establishment of the FET Strategy Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC); the Committee has a key advisory role in ensuring the efficient and effective implementation of the FET Strategy. Its membership comprises representatives from the sector including each of the lead partner organisations. It is chaired by the Department of Education and Skills and supported and hosted by SOLAS.

Goal 1: Skills for the Economy

The implementation phase is well underway and progress to-date under *Goal 1: Skills for the Economy* includes the development of the National Skills Strategy (NSS) which is informed by the FET Strategy and is guiding the development of Regional Skills Forums. The NSS is expected to be finalised later in the year. Protocols are now in place between the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) to establish structured links to support the provision of information for enterprise development. The new Apprenticeship

System is progressing and new Career Traineeships are being developed by SOLAS in conjunction with the ETBs in the hospitality, engineering and horticulture sectors.

Goal 2: Active Inclusion
Under *Goal 2: Active Inclusion*, the National Literacy and Numeracy Advisory Committee established in January 2015 is progressing actions outlined in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Implementation Plan. NALA and ETBI are working closely with SOLAS in that regard.

Goal 3: Quality Provision
Under *Goal 3: Quality Provision*, the establishment of the National Learner Forum is being led by AONTAS and will take place in 2016. A Customer Charter is being developed by ETBI, while QQI are working to ensure that existing pathways to and within higher education are formalised and mapped for learners. SOLAS and QQI are working with ETBs, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and Universities on a project to map progression pathways within specific regions and clusters.

> "The new Apprenticeship System is progressing and new Career Traineeships are being developed by SOLAS in conjunction with the ETBs in the hospitality, engineering and horticulture sectors."

Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding
Under *Goal 4: Integrated Planning and Funding*, the integrated FET Services Plan for 2015, which outlines the FET provision nationally, was published by SOLAS earlier this year. The process for 2016 is underway and an outcomes-based funding model is in development by SOLAS in conjunction with the ETBs. An evaluation of the PLC programme provision has commenced and is being conducted by ESRI on behalf of SOLAS.

Goal 5: The Standing of FET
The SOLAS Communications and Branding Strategy has been approved by the Board of SOLAS and is being progressed under *Goal 5: The Standing of FET.*

Timelines
It has emerged, at this point, that some timelines in the detailed FET Implementation Plan will have to be revised. Proposed changes to timelines are reviewed by the FET SIAC and updates are recorded and managed by the SOLAS Programme Office which provides secretariat to the Committee. An important point is that the task of developing and implementing strategy is not a one-time event but always a work in progress. *Adapting to new conditions and constantly evaluating what is working well enough to continue and what needs to be improved are normal parts of the strategy-making process, resulting in an evolving strategy.*[2] So while the FET Strategy is ambitious and very challenging, it is now very clear that its success depends on committed leadership from all lead partners, taking ownership for their actions and collaborating with all of the support partners. The Strategy provides the framework to enable transformation within the FET sector where all of the partners can work together and pool their expertise and resources to make a real difference to the lives of the circa 231,000 new entrants who will take part in FET programmes in 2015.

For further information or any queries relating to the FET Strategy and the Implementation Plan, please contact Caitriona Murphy, Project Manager at the SOLAS Programme Office on:
caitriona.murphy@solas.ie and
01-5332489.

The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 – 2019 and other publications are available on www.solas.ie

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1. OECD (2015), "Editorial", in *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*, OECD Publishing, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234833-2-en
2. Montgomery, Cynthia A. (2008) 'Putting leadership back into strategy', *Harvard Business Review*, 86 (1): 54-60

Making haste slowly: FET in 2015 and 2016

By **Dr John Sweeney**

Freelance writer and labour market consultant

The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 is well advanced[1]. In another two to three years, ETBs, with support from SOLAS, are to have transformed how they plan their FET provision, become key players in helping Government deliver on the *Action Plan for Jobs* and *Pathways to Work*, and be well advanced in shaping FET provision to meet employer, community and learner skill needs[2]. It continues, clearly, to be a challenging timetable that offers little 'time out' for the reform fatigued.

> "The 2015 Services Plan is the first real attempt to harmonise and coordinate former FÁS training and VEC education provision - public, private and not-for-profit - to ensure that, in each ETB region and nationally, they deliver on the objectives of the FET Strategy for 2014-2019."

Services Plan: harmonising former FÁS training and VEC provision

The FET Services Plan 2015 is the second under the new strategy but the first for which SOLAS is wholly responsible. Though the Strategy 'commits to the replacement of the legacy funding formula' with a strategic input/outcomes based funding model', SOLAS notes, rather honestly, that in the 2014 version, 'no fundamental change to the legacy approaches to planning took place' (4); a lot of provision already agreed between former VECs and the DES was simply summarised. The 2015 Services Plan, by contrast, is the first real attempt to harmonise and coordinate former FÁS training

and VEC education provision – public, private and not-for-profit – to ensure that, in each ETB region and nationally, they deliver on the objectives of the FET Strategy for 2014-2019.

As a descriptive document, the 2015 Services Plan provides a rich picture of the FET sector at work. It is, for example, salutary to be reminded that SOLAS allocated a budget of just over €640m in 2015 to support the provision of almost 370,000 learning opportunities. Is this a lot of money? On the one hand, it is only twice what the Community Employment (CE) programme cost in 2012; on the other, it is for provision that is mainly part-time (63%), mainly at Level 4 or lower on the NFQ (60%) and a large slice of it is non-accredited (40%, in community education, arts education and literacy services). In short, the Services Plan reminds us forcibly that the FET sector in Ireland is serving a swathe of the population most of whom are distant from the labour market, and has many learners for whom personal development and social goals are significantly more important than employment goals. The five or six years of the Strategy (2014-2019) is not a long time in which to raise the status of the sector and transform it into the agile system responsive to learners, employers and government priorities that the Strategy envisages.

> "This will see them [ETBs] being transformed over time from being bodies that represent the interests of particular sets of producers into bodies that represent the long-term interests of local learners, employers and communities."

Framework for allocation and distribution of funds

A new planning model and process was followed in drawing up the 2015 Plan. Each ETB submitted a Funding Allocation Request (FAR) on the basis of a template provided by SOLAS and provided data that the Plan then aggregates. While the data is still poor in quality in several respects, it *begins* to allow comparisons to be made across programmes and between ETBs, and to set a benchmark for tracking developments from year to year. The clear goal is to develop a framework that will enable SOLAS to allocate funds to ETBs on the basis of needs they identify in their jurisdictions *and* ETBs, in turn, to distribute those funds on the basis of the proven ability of different programmes and providers to produce the required outputs and support the desired outcomes. There are two truly transformational changes involved here.

> "Are not the majority of staff for whom ETBs have direct responsibility in fact teachers whose attention and energy is focussed on issues affecting secondary schools rather than on labour market skills, regional economic development, employer profiles and the like?"

ETBs being nudged by SOLAS into a different world

In the first place, it is envisaged that ETBs will get aggregate budgets based on analyses of the needs and demand for FET of the communities, workforce and employers in their jurisdictions. Formerly, the budgets of VECs were largely the *result* of the particular mix and levels of operation of existing national programmes that each was running. Under the Strategy, the ETBs are being nudged and pulled by SOLAS into a wholly different world where capacity to run existing national programmes is to become less and less relevant. Instead, each ETB must make the case for, and will then be given significant autonomy to use, an overall budget or bloc grant. This will see them being transformed over time from

being bodies that represent the interests of particular sets of producers into bodies that represent the long-term interests of local learners, employers and communities.

Metamorphosis required of ETB staffs and boards

SOLAS is helping CEs and boards of ETBs to become authortitative in these areas in several ways, for example, by supplying them with more comprehensive and richer data on the adult populations and employer base in their jurisdictions, providing labour market intelligence through diverse channels, and encouraging engagement with employers in multiple ways (e.g., new 'regional skills fora', p.18). Much of the Services Plan reads impressively in these areas but even the most sympathetic reader must still be left wondering. Are not the majority of staff for whom ETBs have direct responsibility in fact teachers whose attention and energy is focussed on issues affecting secondary schools rather than on labour market skills, regional economic development, employer profiles and the like? Does the composition of ETB boards even remotely reflect the Straategy's emphasis on local and regional economic development? Is it not the fact that many learners will only progress back to employment 'over a longer timeframe', a timeframe that many current programme evaluations are not adopting?

A second transformational change envisaged by the Strategy and, to some extent, underway in the 2015 Plan, is just as large. It envisages ETBs functioning as hubs for the distribution of their aggregate budgets across programmes and providers in the mixes that best meet the needs of the learners, employers and communities in their jurisdictions. It is for them to get on with changing the relative use they are making of existing programmes, improve how an individual programme is performing, or bring in an altogether new programme to be delivered in-house or by a contracted party.

Programme Evaluations

One of the main supports SOLAS provides them, in this quest to get better outputs

and outcomes, is the flow and quality of individual programme evaluations it provides. They serve to allow CEOs and the boards of ETBs to see more clearly what is working and for whom. They can also be crucially important formative processes that give existing providers new insights and stimuli to improve. An evaluation of the PLC programme is underway and its findings are to inform the 2016 Services Plan, while evaluations of VTOS, the Back to Education Initiative, Specific Skills Training and Traineeships are soon to be commissioned.

> "An evaluation of the PLC programme is underway and its findings are to inform the 2016 Services Plan, while evaluations of VTOS, the Back to Education Initiative, Specific Skills Training and Traineeships are soon to be commissioned."

Momentum programme

A second important way in which SOLAS is helping ETBs to improve the mix of programmes they fund is via the Momentum programme which it administers directly at national level. Momentum projects have the potential to allow ETBs, as it were, observe the emergence of good practice in serving the FET needs of a hugely significant group, the long-term unemployed. An evaluation of the programme carried out on the basis of its first round of projects in 2014 does not really provide the rich detail that ETBs need to advocate change on the part of other providers but the potential to do so is there if the programme is continued. As the imminent new National Skills Strategy will hopefully make clear, Ireland is not – and cannot – be indifferent to how the large numbers of people who are still short-term and long-term unemployed have their needs met. Far from subscribing to an 'any job is better than none' or 'a job at all costs' approach, labour market and activation policies must be consistent with the high level goal of building an economy that relies on people's abilities (employees, managers and self-employed) in order to remain competitive and agile. The FET sector has an indispensable role in helping achieve this. The Strategy is clear on this but, as the economy enters a new period of growth, the primacy to be accorded to upskilling and reskilling as the highroad to 'activation' may need to be more clearly focussed and more strongly articulated.

Conclusion

In summary, as well as a rich description of the current state of play, the 2015 FET Services Plan is a monitoring document that serves as a check on the realism of the Strategy and on progress in delivering on its objectives and timetable. From this angle, it can be read as a compromise document drawn up between a more labour market-focussed and employment-ambitious SOLAS and a large body of socially oriented and community focussed providers speaking through their ETBs. A fair reading of the document must conclude that, by and large, more is underway than is widely realised and that there are grounds for hoping that the dichotomy between FET for employment and FET for social inclusion will eventually be dissolved. This however will take time – certainly to the end of 2019 – as data and procedures for capturing what programmes actually achieve for learners are improved, as this evidence acquires the confidence of more and more providers and plays a greater role in how resources are allocated. Programme evaluations are underway or imminent that will help but they must be of a high standard and, while participated in by stakeholders, not be captured by them but genuinely 'tell it like it is' from the standpoint of learners, employers and communities.

> "There are grounds for hoping that the dichotomy between FET for employment and FET for social inclusion will eventually be dissolved."

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1. Despite the six year period in its title (2014-2019), it is typically spoken of as a five-year plan.
2. FET Services Plan 2015: 6

New Network of Regional Skills Fora

By **Anne Ford**

Department of Education & Skills

For many employers, it can be hard to understand the different types of providers, courses and services available across the further and higher education and training system and how to access them. With over 185,000 employers in the business economy alone, the majority employing less than 10 people each, establishing links and building relationships with individual employers can also pose significant challenges for ETBs and higher education institutions. While there are many excellent examples of collaboration with enterprise across both sectors, the forging of links is very often driven by connections between individuals rather than a systematic approach to engagement. To help address the challenges around engagement the Department of Education and Skills in late 2014 commenced a project to create a network of regional skills structures. The key objectives of this initiative are:

» To provide a cohesive education led structure for employers and the FET and HE systems to work together in building the skills needs of their regions;
» To help employers better understand and access the full range of services available across the education and training system;
» To enhance links between education and training providers in planning and delivering programmes, reduce duplication, and inform national funding decisions.

The work to create the new skills fora is being undertaken in the context of the strong focus on the skills agenda as part of Government policy to support economic recovery and development, job creation and tackle unemployment. This includes the development of a new national Skills Strategy and Enterprise Policy statement to 2025 and the publication of 8 Regional Action Plans for Jobs in 2015. Actions providing for the establishment of the Skills fora are being included in each of the regional APJs.

It is hoped that the new skills structures will contribute to better outcomes for learners and support enterprise development and job creation by providing:

» More robust labour market information and analysis of employer needs;
» Better alignment of education and training provision with the skills' needs of each region;
» Greater collaboration and utilisation of resources across the education and training system and enhancement of progression routes for learners;
» Maximisation of employment, career progression and entrepreneurships opportunities available to learners in each region.

> "The forging of links [between individual employers and course providers] is very often driven by connections between individuals rather than a systematic approach to engagement."

The fora are intended to provide a framework to support and facilitate, not replace or cut across, the implementation of actions by individual ETBs or HEIs to enhance

links with enterprise and prepare learners for the different roles they will have over their working lives. They will only succeed if they provide tangible benefits for participants so the design and operation of the Forum in each region needs to be determined in consultation with local employers and other key stakeholders. The intention is not to create additional 'attendance burdens' for either employers or public bodies.

> "A key objective of this new initiative [network of regional skills structures] is to enhance links between education and training providers in planning and delivering programmes, reduce duplication and inform national funding decisions."

What has happened to date?
The DES initially sought input from a range of education and employer bodies at national level about the proposal, including the HEA, SOLAS, Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), IBEC, ISME, Chambers Ireland and QQI. Starting in March, a series of joint meetings then took place with ETBs, HEIs and Skillnets, SOLAS and the HEA across the country to outline the objectives for the fora and to seek views on the best way to proceed in each region. At each meeting an ETB or HEI undertook to organise a follow up meeting in each region to further develop the concept for the fora and to start the process of consulting with other local stakeholders. The education and training provider group (ETPG) in each region will continue to be responsible for managing local consultations to design and establish the fora and when established, it will be responsible for overseeing their operation.

A series of IBEC regional skills seminars held in Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Dublin in May also provided the opportunity to build employer support for the proposal.

Steering Groups are now in place in the South-West, South-East, Mid-West, West, North West and North East and the process to establish Steering Groups in the Midlands and the Mid-East is underway. All groups are agreed on the need for a partnership approach involving all key local stakeholders in deciding how the fora will operate. While there has been some variation in the initial steps to establish the Fora across the regions some common approaches and issues are emerging.

Skills Forum Membership
The emerging membership across the regions is:

Public bodies: Education and Training Providers (ETBs, IoTs, Universities, Skillsnet),

Enterprise agencies (EI, IDA, LEOs), Local authorities, INTREO.

Private sector: Representatives of employers in each region (individual employers and /or rep bodies such as IBEC, Chambers/professional bodies).

> "Steering Groups are now in place in the South-West, South-East, Mid-West, West, North West and North East, and the process to establish Steering Groups in the Midlands and the Mid-East is underway. All groups are agreed on the need for a partnership approach involving all key local stakeholders in deciding how the fora will operate."

Operation of the Fora
A key issue for every group has been how to best engage with the different categories of employers from start-ups, to SMEs and large companies across different sectors, recognising that it is unrealistic to expect every employer to be a member of a Forum or to participate in all activities. Suggested approaches include:

» The enterprise agencies and employer organisations represented on each

Forum could act as conduit to their respective client/member base, for example in promoting events, disseminating labour market intelligence, helping to coordinate views on specific skills needs, etc.

» A mix of opportunities to reach out to employers is needed. These could range from an annual event for a strategic consideration of skills' issues of the region to the establishment of sub groups to focus on specific sectors. In some regions such groups already exist e.g. IT@Cork and there was interest in sharing best practice across the Fora on how these type of groups might work for other sectors.

"SOLAS has made presentations to most groups on the labour market on intelligence available for their regions."

Some common areas for actions to be taken by the Skills fora have also emerged across the regions, including:

» How to enhance communication of existing programmes, services and supports available to employers in each region and how they can access these services;
» How to provide for regular evidence based dialogue between employers and education and training providers on skills gaps and future skills needs in order to inform programme design and development;
» How to promote the range of employment roles and career paths available across different sectors in the region and encourage young people and adults to develop the skills for these roles.

SOLAS has made presentations to most groups on the labour market on intelligence available for their regions and will also assist the new fora with preparing for and reporting on any regional events to analyse skills needs. The 8 Regional APJs, when published, will also provide a very good overview of the enterprise base in each region and emerging opportunities.

Next Steps
DES has put in place a Project Advisory Group (PAG) at national level to oversee the project. It will also be establishing a dedicated funding line to support the establishment of the network of fora in 2016. Further guidance on the operation of the fora from the start of 2016, including in relation to funding to support the process, will be provided by DES over the coming months. DES will also organise a facilitated workshop later in the autumn to enable representatives from all of the regional Steering Groups to come together and share views on the process to date and consider some of the horizontal issues that are emerging across the regions.

Integrating and coordinating FET with the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS)

By **Fiona Maloney**

PLSS Coordinator, Education and Training Boards Ireland

The Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) is a joint project between SOLAS (the National Further Education and Training Authority) and ETBI (Education and Training Boards Ireland), on behalf of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). PLSS is a suite of software applications designed to provide, for the first time in the Irish Education system, an integrated approach to the collection of key data on further education and training (FET) programme outputs, outcomes and performance. The PLSS will expose a comprehensive overview of further education and training programmes at national level; key data on further education and training programme outputs, outcomes and performance; and provide a mechanism for the secure sharing, collecting and utilising of Further Education and Training data. It will also support those accessing further education and training opportunities to develop their full potential.

Fiona Maloney was appointed to ETBI in November 2014 to work with the 16 ETBs on the development of the PLSS systems; to develop a project implementation plan to identify and address the business processes required for putting PLSS in place; and to provide on-going support for ETBs, including the provision of a central contact point for ETB queries relating to PLSS.

> "PLSS is a suite of software applications designed to provide, for the first time in the Irish Education system, an integrated approach to the collection of key data on further education and training (FET) programme outputs, outcomes and performance."

The Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) is designed to be a fit-for-purpose data infrastructure to support further education and training policy and provision. PLSS will also be the integrated and coordinated mechanism for the achievement of Strategic Goal 4 of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, which is to implement a new planning and funding model for further education and training.

> "Until the publication of the SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy there was an absence of strategic or central planning in further education and training, largely because the sector developed organically…"

Helping to address the central planning deficit

Until the publication of the SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy there was an absence of strategic or central planning in further education and training largely because the sector developed organically, distinctly and extemporaneously, responding to local need in the absence of national policy or guidelines. The development of PLSS is part of the reforms proposed to address this legacy. It is currently being developed and hosted by SOLAS and when completed will be utilised primarily within the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). An overview of the PLSS system is diagrammatically presented in **Figure 1** below.

The PLSS project

PLSS development is a complex project with data being gathered and utilised in real time to support the business process of SOLAS, ETBs and the Department of Social Protection (DSP), ensuring the systematic and timely access to data pertaining to further education and training (FET) provision. When complete, PLSS will provide for the first time a centralised platform for the collection and exposure of data on FET courses, learners and their outcomes, thus enabling evidence-based planning, coordination and funding of FET. The PLSS IT infrastructure developed and managed by SOALS has provided for a high level of security including logging and audit trail capability and access permission levels.

> "When complete, PLSS will provide for the first time a centralised platform for the collection and exposure of data on FET courses, learners and their outcomes, thus enabling evidence-based planning, coordination and funding of FET."

The introduction of PLSS offers a unique opportunity to progress a modern data infrastructure for FET that embraces the benefits of data sharing and reuse, and will provide transparency, accountability and increased data quality on FET student/learners' education and training history. PLSS facilitates the use of shared data and information, using technology systems, efficiently organised populated databases coded with agreed universal identifiers.

PLSS Infrastructure

As evident in Figure 1 below, within PLSS there are three elements all of which require data exchange and sharing to varying degrees between identified stakeholders including **SOLAS, ETBs, DES, DSP** and **QQI.**

(i) National programme database

The PLSS National Programme Database will be a repository of all programmes or courses designed to be run by FET providers under the aegis of SOLAS. Containing a full inventory of further education and training programmes, the database will provide a full picture of FET provision, and support the scheduling of FET programmes.

(ii) National course calendar scheduling

The PLSS National Course Calendar Scheduling System will contain a full inventory of further education and training programmes along with details of where and when they are being run. This element will support effective learner decision-making in choosing courses that best meet their needs. Course offer, course search, and course referral by DSP for engaging clients is available through this element. Referrals from DSP to ETB FET programmes through PLSS will allow for certain learner data -- including PPSN, name, surname, contact details, age, gender, nationality, education -- to travel with clients from the DSP IT system to the PLSS, avoiding duplication of data collection in the ETB and increasing efficiencies for the learner regarding the application and enrolment process. As evident in **Figure 1** a self-referral mechanism to FET programmes will also be available.

(iii) National learner database

The PLSS National Learner Database is a learner records system. It will enable data collection in relation to the learner profile, including learner course activity from application, enrolment, and course completion to course outcomes, progression to further study, employment, unemployment or inactivity. The learner database will provide clear information on learners and their expressed interest(s), course starts, progress, completion and certification. Only education progress and attainment touch points in the learner life-cycle will be stored in the PLSS learner database which will also inform the recruitment process to FET courses and inform policy and strategic implementation for the FET Sector.

> "The **PLSS National Programme Database** will be a repository of all programmes or courses designed to be run by FET providers under the aegis of SOLAS."

PLSS Outline — Programme and Learner Support Services
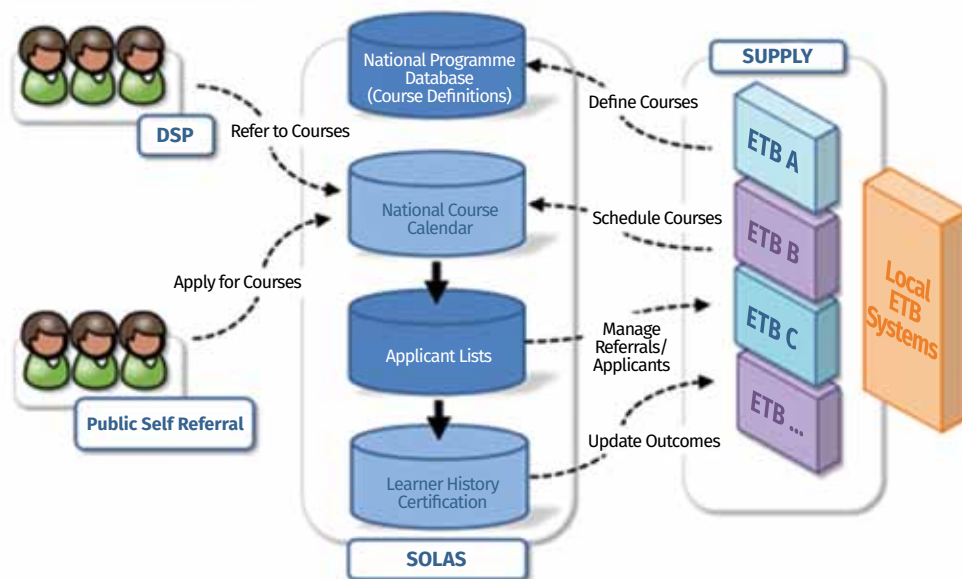
Figure 1 Programme Learner Support System Configuration

Data Sharing

PLSS facilitates the use of shared data and information, using modern technology systems, efficiently organised populated databases coded with agreed universal identifiers. Only data that is required for the fulfilment of SOLAS mandate under the Further Education and Training Act 2013 will be collected in PLSS. While data will be collected at an individual level, it will only be used for statistical purposes and reported and published exclusively at a level of aggregation sufficient to protect individuals' identity.

To further this sharing of data, a memorandum of understanding allowing for the sharing of required data between SOLAS, ETBs and DSP has been signed. In addition, the recent 2015 commencement of Statutory Instrument S.I. No. 317 of 2015 Social Welfare Consolidations (Claims, Payments and Control) (amendment) (No.4) (Sharing of Information) supports the data sharing process. The joining up and sharing of data in a national data infrastructure will provide transparency, accountability, improved efficiency and increased data quality, which many will argue is imperative to ensure best possible return from public expenditure.

Conclusion

Systems such as the PLSS that facilitate the use of shared data and information can significantly enhance access to and delivery of public education and training services, thus improving system performance, social cohesion and national and individual prosperity. Currently we have the opportunity through the development and deployment of PLSS to seize a real opportunity to realise real benefits for the individual and society.

> "The **PLSS National Course Calendar Scheduling System** will contain a full inventory of further education and training programmes along with details of where and when they are being run."

Ireland embarks on major expansion of apprenticeship route to education, training and careers

By **Dr Mary-Liz Trant & Ray Kelly**

Dr Mary-Liz Trant, Executive Director Skills Development, SOLAS
Ray Kelly, Director Apprenticeship and Construction Services, SOLAS

'If Ireland is to be both competitive and in-novative we need a highly skilled workforce. Apprenticeships offer a tried and tested method of developing highly skilled workers using a powerful mixture of course work and practical on the job learning. I am delighted we are now about to double the number of Apprenticeship Schemes to better serve the needs of a whole new range of in-dustry sectors, and to offer new and exciting career opportunities to our people.'

Minister Damien English TD, speaking at the announcement of development plans for twenty-five new apprenticeships, 30 July 2015

30 July 2015 was a red letter day for appren-ticeships and career development options in Ireland, when the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD, and the Min-ister of State for Skills, Research and In-novation, Damien English TD, announced plans for development of twenty-five new apprenticeship programmes, adding to the twenty-seven currently in existence.

The announcement followed extensive work over the past three years, which in-cluded a formal review of the apprentice-ship system nationally. Published in Janu-ary 2014, the review set out the role and contribution of apprenticeships as part of the education and training system in Ire-land. It charted the growth in strong in-dustry-education partnerships in learning around the world, where learners, employ-ers and national economies are benefiting significantly from the apprenticeship mod-el of education and training. The review also set out recommendations on how the Irish approach should evolve to meet the current and future skills needs of employers and the economy, and how to expand access for potential apprentices and employers.

The review supported two major new ini-tiatives by the State, firstly to compre-hensively review and develop the existing twenty-five apprenticeship programmes so that they continue to be fit-for-purpose for employers and trainee apprentices, and secondly, to embark on development of ap-prenticeships in new and emerging areas of skills need.

Review and development of existing apprenticeships

Apprenticeship holds a high status among Irish employers, and there is broad aware-ness of the superb career development op-portunities the apprenticeship route has provided to thousands of young and older people in Ireland. Since the introduction of the Standards Based Apprenticeship Sys-tem in 1993, more than 60,000 apprentices have successfully qualified as craftspeople, with over 30,000 employers engaged in employing and training apprentices around the country. The quality of Irish apprentices and the apprenticeship system is also rec-ognised internationally. Irish craftspeople are in demand among employers around the world and Ireland has a record of excel-lent performance at the World Skills Com-petition, an event which enables appren-tices from seventy countries and regions to demonstrate their skills in the areas of craft and technology. Since 2009, when Ireland started competing in the biennial World Skills competitions, the Irish teams have brought home ten gold medals, two silver

medals, a bronze medal and twenty-five medallions of excellence.

To ensure the continued relevance and quality of existing apprenticeships, a large-scale project of review and standards development for the twenty-five areas of craft apprenticeship got underway in 2013. SOLAS, employer and trade union representative organisations, Education and Training Boards, Institutes of Technology and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are working collectively on the project, with SOLAS co-ordinating the process. The initial focus was to develop occupational and award standards and to revise the curricula for five craft apprenticeship programmes. To-date, these five craft apprenticeships have been comprehensively reviewed, and have recently gone through a validation process with the QQI. It is planned that work on the remainder of the apprenticeships will be completed by early-to-mid 2016. While all apprenticeships currently lead to an award at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications, it is possible that, following the review project, some apprenticeships will be repositioned at either a higher or a lower level on the Framework.

Table 1 List of existing apprenticeships, grouped by industry sector

Construction	Brick and stonelaying
	Carpentry and joinery
	Floor and wall tiling
	Painting and decorating
	Plastering
	Plumbing
	Wood manufacturing and finishing
Electrical	Electrician
	Electrical instrumentation
	Instrumentation
	Refrigeration and air conditioning
	Aircraft mechanics
	Electronic security systems
Motor	Agricultural mechanics
	Construction plant fitting
	Heavy vehicle mechanics
	Motor mechanics
	Vehicle body repairs
Engineering	Mechanical automation and maintenance fitting
	Metal fabrication
	Sheet metal work
	Toolmaking
	Industrial insulation
	Farriery
Printing	Print media

Development of new apprenticeships

Also in 2014, a new Apprenticeship Council was established by the Minister for Education and Skills. The Council began its work in November of that year. Its principal initial objective was to advise on and support development of apprenticeships in areas of new and emerging skills needs.

The Council issued a Call for Proposals on new apprenticeships in January 2015 via a dedicated website www.apprenticeship-council.ie. The Call included a range of criteria to guide proposers. These criteria were drawn from the 2014 National Review recommendations. The criteria were as follows:

» New apprenticeships must be industry-led and specific on the occupation for which they are preparing trainee apprentices
» They must be substantial in depth and duration, in order to prepare apprentices to work autonomously and competently in a specific occupation
» They will lead to an award recognised on the National Framework of Qualifications and may span Level 5 to Level 10
» They will be a minimum of two years in duration
» Learning undertaken must alternate between the workplace and the formal learning setting
» A minimum of 50% of the apprenticeship is allocated to on-the-job training

» Apprentices will be employed and paid under a Contract of Apprenticeship.

In response to the Call for Proposals for new apprenticeships, 86 separate proposals were received from 46 consortia around the country. The consortia included companies, employer networks and education and training providers. A wide range of industry sectors were covered, including ICT, engineering, financial services; hospitality; tourism; business administration and management. In many cases companies and networks of companies were the lead proposers, and in others, further and higher education and training providers took the lead, with support from named industry partners.

Following a detailed evaluation process, twenty-five of the proposals were recommended by the Council as being both sustainable and at an advanced stage of design, planning and industry/education collaboration. These proposals are being developed during the remainder of 2015 and into 2016, with the aim to roll out a range of new offerings to employers and trainee apprentices over the coming twelve-to-eighteen months. The new apprenticeships, set out in Table 1 below, will span a range of skills and sectors, will range in duration from two-to-four-years, and will lead to awards spanning Levels 5 to 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

Table 2 New apprenticeship programmes approved for development 2015-16

Proposer	New apprenticeship title
Accounting Technicians Ireland	Higher apprenticeship in accountancy
Association of Craft Butchers of Ireland	Butchery and fresh food retail
Combilift	OEM technician
Dawson Travel	Travel professional
Donegal ETB	Advanced craft welder
Donegal ETB	Craft welder
Eircom	Telecommunications field technician
Fasttrack to IT	Network engineering
Fasttrack to IT	Software developer
Financial Services Ireland	International financial services generalist
Financial Services Ireland	International financial services advanced specialist
Financial Services Ireland	International financial services specialist
Flour Confectionary and Bakers Association	Baker
Irish Hotels Federation & Restaurants Association of Ireland	Commis chef
Irish Medical Device Association	Manufacturing engineer
Irish Medical Device Association	Manufacturing technician
Irish Road Haulage Association	HGV driver
IT Tralee	Sous chef
IT Tralee	Chef de partie
IT Tralee	Commis chef
IT Tralee	Executive chef
Limerick IOT	Field service engineer – Electrical technology
National Institute of Transport and Logistics	Warehouse and distribution operative
Plastics Ireland	Polymer processing technician
Zurich Insurance	General insurance practitioner

A further substantial number of the remainder of the new apprenticeship proposals were deemed by the Apprenticeship Council to have substance and merit. These proposals will be further developed, albeit with a longer timeframe for completion and roll out.

Sustaining a world-class apprenticeship system in Ireland – Challenges ahead

It is clear that a lot has been achieved in apprenticeship education and training over the past three years, with significant further activity during 2015-2017. Building on its strong track record, and along with the development of innovative new apprenticeships, Ireland has the opportunity to further develop and embed a world-class apprenticeship system. Success will bring great benefits, with apprenticeship forming part of a system of vibrant, high quality education and training that meets the needs of employers and of learners and supports the return of a dynamic, prosperous economy and society in Ireland.

There are, however, challenges in achieving and sustaining this goal of a world-class apprenticeship system, of which three in particular will need resolution over the next 2-3 years.

(i) Communicating the value of the apprenticeship route

Firstly, there is a need to enhance awareness of the opportunity and value of the apprenticeship route among young and older people, in particular within the large group of learners who thrive on the dual mode of learning, combining workplace learning in an enterprise with classroom teaching in an education or training setting, and the practical as well as theoretical approach that an apprenticeship provides. There is also a need for enhanced understanding among employers of the opportunity and attractiveness of the apprenticeship route, in particular those employers who are in new and emerging industry sectors, and those in the foreign direct investment category as well as indigenous companies.

(ii) Establishing a unified apprenticeship system

The second challenge relates to how the existing and the new apprenticeships develop together. As a country we have decided to further invest in the apprenticeship route, adding new opportunities to a well-established system. There are, however, differences between the existing and the new; over the coming months good collaboration between key stakeholders will be essential so that the system develops and expands as a coherent whole. Success will mean that the status and reputation of the apprenticeship route is safeguarded and further enhanced among apprentices, employers and the wider public.

(iii) Sustaining collective investment in apprenticeship

The third challenge will be to ensure that the apprenticeship route continues to benefit from sustained investment of human, financial and infrastructural resources by a range of stakeholders, which include employers, the further and higher education and training system, and central Government. It will be important that this investment by multiple partners is effectively coordinated and managed, with the burden of investment equitably shared.

Success will result in a thriving, high-impact route to education, training and careers.

"There is a need to enhance awareness of the opportunity and value of the apprenticeship route among young and older people, in particular within the large group of learners who thrive on the dual mode of learning, combining workplace learning… with classroom teaching…, and the practical as well as theoretical approach."

Making the Further and Education Training sector 'agile and responsive'

By **Peter Davitt**

CEO FIT1

Introduction

The ability to design and bring on stream new programmes on an ongoing basis and as part of 'normal' business – not just in response to emergencies and once off legislative changes – is key to making the Further Education and Training (FET) sector agile and responsive. However, the innovation has to be based on research into the evolving skills needs of the economy, continuous dialogue with employers, close consultation with providers and accrediting bodies, and careful testing and evaluation.

Skills Audit of the IT sector

It all starts with the identification of a need – a skills deficit or skills shortage – that is within the remit of the FET sector to meet and is also within its actual, or attainable, capacity to deliver. Perhaps the single most powerful procedure (itself an innovation) driving new programme development by FIT has been our biannual Skills Audit of the IT sector which we pioneered to help us translate employers' skills needs into FET deliverables. Employer engagement by FIT takes many forms but, next to having a board made up of senior industry representatives, our Skills Audit is probably the single most valuable one (and one which we are going to develop for other sectors).

Our Audits have been independently described as a form of 'hard listening' to employers on where and why they are having difficulty in filling vacancies and as 'granular analyses' of what new employees will need if they are to be ready 'to hit the ground running'. While the Audits are only the beginning of the road in developing new programmes, their findings ensure that

new programmes at Levels 5-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications come on stream that will give those who complete them a solid beginning in a new career.

The FIT ICT Associate Professional programme

This happened, in the way we are most proud of to date, when we published the findings of our 2014 Skills Audit in October that year. The 2014 Audit identified a large number of vacancies in the ICT sector. Its strong demand for graduates in STEM subjects at Levels 8 and higher was well known but our Audit drew attention to the sector's even larger demand for workers who could meet employers' minimum requirements for entering the industry and performing competently in their workplaces. In fact, we established that over 75% of the in-demand IT skills sets were at entry and competent levels and that the thousands of jobs in question would be open to people if they completed well-designed FET technology programmes at Levels 5 and 6, of between six to twenty-four months duration. We were also aware that, with the economic recovery getting under way, this gap between the number of opportunities available in technology roles and those qualifying with the relevant skills sets was going to widen. An innovative response was urgent.

> "Innovation has to be based on research into the evolving skills needs of the economy, continuous dialogue with employers, close consultation with providers and accrediting bodies, and careful testing and evaluation."

As the findings for the 2014 Skills Audit were coming in, we worked intensely with the industry, SOLAS[2], ETBI[3], ICT Ireland[4], and a number of education and training boards (ETBs), to put in place a new programme as a first response to the challenges and opportunities the Audit was highlighting. This programme was launched along with the release of the 2014 findings. In generous words, IBM Ireland's General Manager described FIT at the launch of the Skills Audit as 'walking the talk'.

> "Our Audits have been independently described as a form of 'hard listening' to employers on where and why they are having difficulty in filling vacancies; and as 'granular analyses' of what new employees will need if they are to be ready 'to hit the ground running'."

Participants 'learn and earn'

The FIT ICT Associate Professional programme that we brokered is a two-year pathway to a Level 6 qualification. It starts with classroom-based training delivered by the ETBs for the first six months and is followed by eighteen months of dual education that combines college day-release with on-the-job training in a sponsoring company. The companies that have already signed up as sponsors include Accenture, AOL, AQMetrics, the Central Bank, CIX, the ESB, Fujitsu, IBM, ICS, Indiro, KantanMT, Linkedin, Matrix Internet, Micro-Pro, Microsoft, Opennet, PFH, Salmon Software, SAP, Spector, Stanley Security, Version 1 and Xilinx, each one pledging bespoke-training based on their own requirements. As it has started, the pilot programme will provide 200 places in two streams, preparing 'associate professionals' for occupations in systems & networks and in software development respectively.

The programme is demanding of participants and FIT makes no apology for being extremely careful in ensuring that people who start on it will find that it is 'for them', enjoy it, complete it, and meet their sponsoring company's expectations. During the two years, participants have to acquire significant technical acumen and academic basics as well as develop their team work, customer-facing and other employability skills. FIT remains in a support role with participants before, during and after their training, they 'learn and earn', and the rewards are immediate. They are paid a training allowance while studying with the ETBs and, after that, get a weekly payment of €260 – €290 from their sponsoring employer for the remainder of the first year and of between €340 – €385 in the second year.

FIT sees immense potential for the further development and expansion of the Associate Professional programme. It is clearly 'apprenticeship-like' but has been developed in an unusual way that offers the prospect of keeping the programme responsive and agile in ensuring that training keeps pace with the challenges and opportunities being thrown up by Ireland's most dynamic economic sector.

The Manufacturing Technician Maintenance Skills programme

Another 'market opportunity' identified by FIT and acted on in 2015 involves young people joining advanced manufacturing teams in initially junior equipment maintenance roles that nevertheless make them integral members of work teams. Thereafter, in many respects, the sky is the limit in regard to their opportunities to specialise and advance their careers. Advanced manufacturing processes across a range of sectors – pharmaceuticals, computer parts, plastics, paper products, and many more – now make use of similar types of machinery and equipment that are calibrated and controlled with extreme precision in extremely special operating environments. The person familiar with the basics of how this advanced equipment is maintained and its performance monitored can free up more specialised staff, including the holders of advanced Craft Certificates, to concentrate on tasks that need their higher expertise.

> "We established that over 75% of the in-demand IT skills sets were at entry and competent levels and that the thousands of jobs in question would be open to people if they completed well-designed FET technology programmes at Levels 5 and 6, of between six to twenty-four months duration."

The Intel plant in Leixlip, where the manufacturing process is one of the most advanced in the world (visually, it is like working for NASA), was where FIT launched a pilot Manufacturing Technician Maintenance Skills programme, accredited at Level 6, with the enthusiastic support of the company itself, as well as of SOLAS and the Kildare-Wicklow and Longford-Westmeath ETBs. Beginning at the end of 2015, the pilot will run three times for 20 trainees at a time. Females as well as males are being targeted to undertake 48 weeks of full-time training in which seven modules will teach them the essentials of how sophisticated industrial equipment operates and is controlled and a further two (one on communications and one of 12 weeks work experience) will give them the opportunity to develop and demonstrate that they have the core soft skills required (good hand-to-eye coordination, good eyesight, confidence and ability in problem-solving, good members of multi-disciplinary teams).

It is early days but, again, this Level 6 experiment is responding to a need that has been verified by a company of the stature of Intel and is being watched with interest by other prestigious manufacturing employers to see if the FET sector has, indeed, opened up a new recruitment channel for them.

Conclusions
The two programmes described are the principal innovations FIT introduced in 2015 in its on-going mission to meet the skills requirements of quality employers by developing the latent talents of people

1. http://fit.ie
2. http://www.solas.ie
3. http://www.etbi.ie
4. http://www.ictireland.ie

who are long-term unemployed. There is much more FIT would like to do but the two examples illustrate well some of the challenges and opportunities that all FET providers face in keeping up with the continually evolving skills needs of employers in Ireland.

Some of the clearest challenges and opportunities are:

i.   to realise, and communicate strongly to jobseekers and their families, that Level 6 qualifications can be the launch pad to satisfying careers in sectors of the economy that are growing;
ii. to appreciate just how highly employers now prize familiarity with the requirements and ethos of contemporary workplaces, which is what dual-education programme are meant to provide;
iii. to accept that what employers and modern workplaces require is far from obvious but changing and that FET providers have to enter willingly into pro-active, sustained and systematic procedures for 'listening' to their requirements and adapting curricula accordingly;
iv. to communicate clearly to parents and jobseekers that starting employment with a Level 6 qualification does not preclude – and may even enhance prospects of – securing a third level qualification later;
v.   to take responsibility for developing and fostering close working relationships with higher education institutions in their area.

FIT is delighted that its ICT Associate Professional (AP) programme was one of the 23 tier- one candidates selected by the National Apprenticeship Council for its potential to become a formal apprenticeship under the new model being developed by the Council. It is a priority for FIT now to explore this potential and ensure that, as soon as possible in 2016, the best possible structures are built around the ICT AP programme that will underpin its capacity to expand and deliver for employers and jobseekers on a sustained basis.

Learner-Informed Policy Making

By **Katie O'Rourke**

Communications Officer, AONTAS

What is the Learner Voice and why is it so important?

According to research, Learner Voice means "empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals." Essentially, it facilitates learners to share their opinions in order to make their learning experience a better one, the benefits of which include a greater sense of ownership over their learning and a more learner-centred, informed education provider.

> "SOLAS has tasked AONTAS with a key action in the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, mandating AONTAS to act as the lead organisation in establishing a **National Adult Learner Forum** in 2016, and every year after for the life of the FET strategy."

As a result of AONTAS's extensive learner engagement and advocacy experience, and as part of its commitment to responding to the needs of learners, SOLAS has tasked AONTAS with a key action in the SOLAS Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy, mandating AONTAS to act as the lead organisation in establishing a National Adult Learner Forum in 2016, and every year after for the life of the FET strategy. In addition to quantitative data on FET learners, through the Forum SOLAS will gain rich qualitative data detailing learners' experiences of the FET service which in turn will help shape future policy decision.

Friday 26th February will mark the first meeting of the National Adult Learner Forum and will act as a national advocacy platform for FET learners where they will have a unique and exciting opportunity to directly influence the FET service based on their needs. In preparation for this event, AONTAS hosted a Learner Voice Seminar in April for FET practitioners in order to draw on their knowledge of learner engagement practices at local level and collectively build support for the National Adult Learner Forum.

> "Friday 26th February [2016] will mark the first meeting of the National Adult Learner Forum and will act as a national advocacy platform for FET learners where they will have a unique and exciting opportunity to directly influence the FET service based on their needs."

A key observation from the Seminar was that there can be no "one size fits all" approach to capturing learners' views and experiences; it involves different methods for different learners depending on their context. Not every learner feels comfortable speaking in front of their peers, therefore a variety of approaches are needed: e.g. one to one conversations with a tutor, written feedback and even an open door policy where learners are made feel comfortable and listened to. Tutors also listed the benefits of engaging the learner voice in their practice, including valuable feedback on their teaching methods, highlighting institutional issues that impact on learning e.g.

class timetables and importantly encouraging practitioner motivation. Ensuring learners feel heard and their recommendations acted upon as best possible were identified as important methods for meaningful learner engagement.

> *"Without learners there would be no FET services, they are at the heart of it and their views must be heard."*
> *Una Buckley, Learner*

As AONTAS believes that learners are at the centre of the FET service and must be part of shaping developments, learner consultations and learner-focused policy events have long been a feature of our advocacy work. As an active participant at such events, Una Buckley has become a vocal learner ambassador. She regularly contributes to AONTAS work and advises: "The most important thing is that learners are given a space and that we feel like our views and issues are being heard." Una is passionate that the Forum is an important step for FET learners as she stresses "Without learners there would be no FET services, they are at the heart of it and their views must be heard."

> *"Not every learner feels comfortable speaking in front of peers, therefore a variety of approaches are needed: one to one conversations with a tutor, written feedback, and even an open door policy where learners are made feel comfortable and listened to."*

AONTAS is striving for balanced learner representation at the National Adult Learner Forum, from across SOLAS FET programmes throughout Ireland, ensuring a good spread of urban and rural participants to capture the range of learner experiences. Una Buckley recently attended an International lifelong learning conference and was disappointed with the level of learner engagement at the event, she said, "They

have no space for learners at all, they're more interested in working for learners than with them". With that experience, Una expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of Ireland leading the way in learner-informed policy making, starting that the Forum next year.

If you are a Further Education and Training provider and would like to have your learners included in the National Adult Learner please contact Karen Williams, Learner Supports Officer, kwilliams@aontas.com, 01-4068220.

What Course?
Dilemma of education provider and learner

By **Jasmina Behan**

Senior Research Officer, Labour Market Economist, Skills and Labour Market Research Unit, SOLAS and Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

Introduction

The two key agents in the education process are learners and education/training providers. Both are making choices about courses: learners about what course to take and providers about what course to provide. To ensure that the choice of course is the right one, learners and providers need to be well informed. In fact, both sides need the same type of information to solve the dilemma of what course to choose.

> "Understanding what happens to learners on completion of a course is important in verifying that the course is aligned to the needs of the economy, and that those who successfully complete the course have a good chance of finding employment in a related field."

Why does the right course choice matter?

When choosing a course, learners and providers are hoping to achieve certain objectives. The objectives can vary given that the benefits from engaging in education and training are manifold. They span professional ('learning to do'), personal ('learning to be') and social ('learning to live together') domains [1]. The contribution that learning makes to professional development is primarily measured by improvements in the labour market situation, although professional development also includes wider benefits such as team working, problem solving and entrepreneurial skills. Personal benefits can be defined in numerous ways and those most commonly used to measure

the impact of education and training include improved self-confidence, attitude to learning, self-motivation and communication skills. Social benefits are even harder to measure and include concepts such as increased social engagement, reduced anti-social behaviour, increased trust and inter-generational gains (e.g. positive impact on children).

> "The most recent research by the EGFSN [Expert Group on Future Skills Needs] indicates that despite over 200,000 unemployed persons, there were shortages in a number of fields such as IT, engineering, healthcare and sales/customer care."

From the societal point of view, funding education and training is essential for upholding civil society, supporting economic progress and increasing wealth. Both learners and education and training providers need courses which are designed to achieve these objectives. In choosing a course, they need to know if it is aligned to their objective and if there is evidence that the objective was reached by the learners who completed that course in the past.

Information requirements

For the majority of learners, engaging in education and training is a path that ultimately leads to employment and, through it, socio-economic advancement. Therefore, the most important information for making decisions around what courses to participate in (from the learner's perspective) or run (from the provider's

perspective) can be broadly grouped into two categories:

Labour market information – given that for many participants in the education process, the ultimate goal is gaining employment, understanding developments in the labour market is essential in deciding what field and level of education and training to participate in. Being well informed means understanding the demand for labour (e.g. what occupations are associated with the most frequent vacancies), supply of labour (e.g. how many students are graduating in a specific field of study) and how they interact (e.g. what occupations are in short supply). It also concerns understanding components of the demand: are vacancies arising due to replacement (replacing those who vacate jobs due to retirement or other exits to economic inactivity), turnover (job changes due to change of employer or an occupation) or expansion (growth in activity of a certain sector of the economy). Having this information allows one to align investment in education and training with the needs of the labour market, resulting in better outcomes for learners and the economy.

Course outcome information – understanding what happens to learners on completion of a course is important in verifying that the course is aligned to the needs of the economy and that those who successfully complete the course have a good chance of finding employment in a related field. This information is important for providers (it provides evidence on how well the curriculum is aligned to the labour market needs) and learners (it signals what courses are more likely to lead to employment in a related field).

What information is there already?
In relation to the labour market intelligence, there is a significant amount of information available, most notably through the work of both the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and the SOLAS Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU). The EGFSN has been informing Government, education and training providers, career guidance bodies and learners about the developments in the Irish labour market at occupational and sectoral levels for almost 20 years. The SLMRU has developed a National Skills Database (NSD) which collates information from a variety of sources to assess the balance between the demand and supply at occupational level and report on any identified shortages. The data held in the NSD (e.g. employment trends and composition, vacancy data, immigration data, job announcements, data on student enrolments and graduation, etc.) is used to assess the situation in the labour market and forecast future demand for skills.

> "The research shows that the field of study determines the likelihood of gaining employment in the related field (e.g. in quarter 4, 2014, 50% of young third level engineering graduates ended up in employment in a related field, compared to 13% of arts and humanities graduates)."

Information gathered and analysed by the EGFSN is published regularly through its annual publications (e.g. National Skills Bulletin, Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply, Vacancy Overview and Regional Labour Market Bulletin) and periodical sectoral studies (e.g. A Study of the Current and Future Skills Requirements of the Marine/Maritime Economy to 2020 (April 2015), Addressing the Demand for Skills in the Freight Transport, Distribution and Logistics Sector in Ireland 2015 – 2020 (February 2015)). The use of this information in aligning education and training provision is illustrated in recent Government initiatives, such as Momentum[2] and Springboard[3].

> "For providers, better information leads to course offerings that meet the needs of learners, the economy and society."

The most recent research by the EGFSN indicates that despite over 200,000 unemployed persons, there were shortages in a number of fields such as IT, engineering, healthcare and sales/customer care[4]. It also indicates that there are job opportunities in the Irish labour market which are associated with transitory employment, particularly in the area of care, sales, clerical work, hospitality and construction. The research also shows that the field of study determines the likelihood of gaining employment in the related field (e.g. in quarter 4 2014, 50% of young third level engineering graduates ended up in employment in a related field, compared to 13% of arts and humanities graduates)[5].

"For learners, better information equips them... to choose courses that enable them to navigate the labour market."

What are information gaps?
There are many data gaps and the information available is far from perfect. For instance, the labour market intelligence lacks systematic input from employers, as well the granularity needed for decision making at local level. Nonetheless, labour market intelligence has improved significantly over the last decade and even in its existing state can provide sound evidence for decision making. Recent initiatives, such the establishment of Regional Skills Fora by the Department of Education and Skills, will improve labour market intelligence at regional and local level.

The information deficit in relation to the measurement of learner outcomes is, however, more challenging, although initiatives have been taken that will address these data gaps. For instance, in the area of higher education, the HEA is in the process of developing a Graduate Outcome Survey to replace the old First Destination Survey. In the area of further education and training (FET), SOLAS is developing a Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS), which is aimed at systematically capturing data on FET learners and providing a platform for the measurement of course outcomes. SOLAS has outlined its commitment to evaluation in the FET Strategy 2014–2019[6] and the development of annual FET Services Plans[7]. Furthermore, thorough links with other public services databases, the system will allow for improved evaluation of existing courses, including the measurement of the contribution the course had in achieving the observed outcome (e.g. would the person have got the job even without completing the course).

Conclusion
Having symmetrically informed learners and course providers with the up to date relevant information is essential in achieving the education and training goals of learners, the economy and society. For learners, better information leads to a better understanding of their role in society, the economy and the labour market. It equips them with the information needed to choose courses that enable them to navigate the labour market, as well as to benefit from technological and social changes over their lifetime. For providers, better information leads to course offerings that meet the needs of learners, the economy and society, by providing skilled, flexible and enlightened citizens, while ensuring prudent investment of public funds. Finally, society as a whole benefits as the funding spent on education and training produces the human capital needed for prosperity and growth.

1. European Lifelong Learning Index (ELLI) uses four domains of learning: learning to learn (formal education), learning to do (vocational learning), learning to be (personal growth) and learning to live together (social cohesion), ELLI Index Europe 2010.
2. http://www.momentumskills.ie/
3. http://skillsdirect.hea.ie/
4. National Skills Bulletin 2015, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, July 2015
5. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2015, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, July 2015
6. Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, http://www.solas.ie/docs/FETStrategy2014-2019.pdf
7. The 2015 Further Education and Training Services Plan 2015, http://www.solas.ie/docs/SOLAS_%20FET_Services_Plan_2015.pdf

ETBs
Developing a World-Class Quality Assurance Framework for Further Education and Training

By **Marie Gould**

ETBI Further Education and Training Officer (Quality Assurance)

Introduction

As relevant providers under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012, ETBs are obliged to take full responsibility for the quality of the programmes, teaching and learning they provide and to agree their quality assurance (QA) procedures with QQI. European and national policy initiatives have identified quality improvements in vocational education and training (VET) as a priority, and quality provision is a core strategic goal in the Further Education & Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019. This article outlines the national and European context for Quality Assurance in FET and the core pillars which will form the building blocks of a collective ETB Quality Assurance Framework.

Legislative Context

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (2012) sets out the responsibility and defines the relationship between providers and the external quality assurance agency, QQI. The ETBs are identified in the Act as 'relevant providers'; section 28(1) outlines the responsibility of each relevant provider to 'establish procedures in writing for the quality of the education, training, research and related services the provider provides'. The Act also requires these procedures to include procedures for evaluation and review of the application and effectiveness of these QA procedures. Meeting the legislative requirements and that of the external quality assurance body necessitates the development and implementation of an evidence-based quality assurance system, which incorporates processes for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the quality of the teaching and learning experience of the learner, the programmes offered, and the effectiveness of the underpinning organisational, governance and quality assurance infrastructure of the ETB.

Each ETB has a responsibility at corporate level for the quality of the programmes, teaching and learning and associated services within the ETB. An ETB will be required to affirm specific responsibility for quality assurance and to embed quality assurance within a visible and transparent governance infrastructure, with mechanisms for feedback and involvement of learners and external stakeholders.

National and European Policy Context

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 provides a clear national policy context and commitment to QA in further education and training (FET). A core aim of the Strategy is to deliver a high quality learning experience, leading to better outcomes for those engaged in FET. One of the five strategic goals within the strategy is 'Quality Provision; that FET will provide high quality education and training programmes and will meet national and international quality standards.'

> "The development and implementation of an ETB Quality Assurance Framework provides an opportunity to establish and agree quality standards and indicators... and a shared vision of how quality teaching and learning should operate..."

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a key role in enhancing Europe's

competitiveness and innovation, providing the skills, knowledge and competences needed in the labour market; and has therefore been identified as an essential part of the EU's strategy that emphasises cooperation between Member States. The Copenhagen Process in 2002 was the first stage in the European strategy to improve the overall performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. Since then, the priorities first set in the Copenhagen Declaration have been further specified and expanded. The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) is a key element in the follow-up to the Copenhagen Declaration and, as such, is designed to promote better vocational education and training by providing common tools for the management of quality. The EQARF is part of a series of European policy initiatives on quality assurance and qualifications in VET, where the aim is to recognise qualifications and competences acquired by learners across different countries or learning environments, thereby promoting modernisation, mutual trust and mobility. The EQARF provides a European-wide system to help Member States and stakeholders to document, develop, monitor, evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their VET provision and quality management practices.

Development of an ETB QA Framework

Given the legislative remit of the ETBs and the national and European legislative and policy contexts for FET, it is logical and desirable that ETBs collaborate and work collectively in developing and ensuring high quality FET provision, with a view to achieving better outcomes for learners, and more efficient use of human and financial resources; all ETBs are committed to doing this.

> "Systematic change takes time… this is an iterative and developmental process."

The development and implementation of an ETB Quality Assurance Framework provides an opportunity to establish and agree quality standards and indicators, to explore

best practice, and articulate a shared vision of how quality teaching and learning should operate, ensuring compliance with national and international standards. It provides an opportunity to systematically improve the service provided to, and outcomes for learners, leading to further recognition and greater credibility for FET programmes. As illustrated in figure 1, the framework will require and result in agreed definitions and standards of quality, including standards for both inputs and outputs/outcomes; agreed process and methods for measuring quality, including agreed indicators and benchmarks and compliance with external criteria/standard; and agreed methods and processes for improving quality, including capacity building and enhancement, within agreed core pillars.
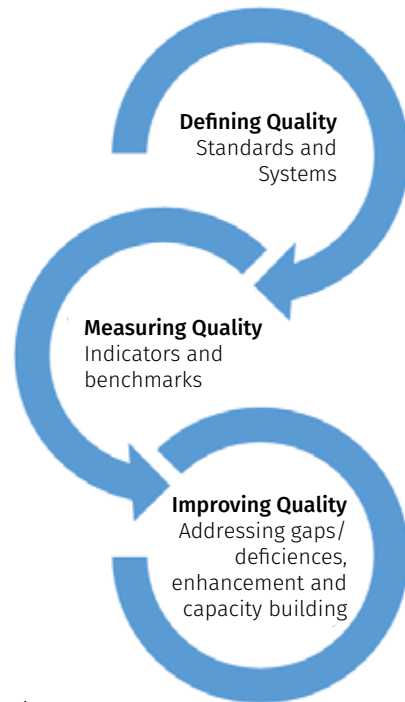
Figure 1

The core pillars of a systematic ETB Quality Assurance Framework will be collectively developed and agreed and may include, for example, the elements as outlined in figure 2 below; methods for defining, measuring and improving quality in these core pillars

ETB QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK
CORE PILLARS

Strategic Planning, Governance and Leadership	Design, Development and Approval of Programmes	Teaching and Learning	Learner Assessment	Internal Monitoring, Self-Evaluation and Review
Quality Statement	Programme design, programme development, evaluation and approval	CPD Framework	Assessment Strategy	Quality Indicators and Benchmarks
Governance i.e. Academic Council and sub-committees	Collaborative Provision	Teaching & Learning Enhancement Activities	Consistency of Grading	Periodic Monitoring of Centres and Programmes
Advisory Committees: i.e. Employers	Programme Review	Access, Transfer & Progression	Centre level assessment processes	Programme Reviews
Designated Responsibility - SMT Quality Office		RPL	Internal Verification	Learner and other Stakeholder Feedback
		Learner Engagement Processes and Activities	External Authentication	Statutory Self-Evaluation
			Results Approval	External Review
			Learner Appeals	

Figure 2 Management Information System to Support Planning, Implementation, Monitoring and Review (PLSS)

is a key challenge ahead. The development of the Framework will also be informed by national and European policy initiatives and standards and other national strategic developments and activities.

Systemic change begins with the articulation of a shared vision for change; mobilising consensus and support, clarifying the mechanism and feasibility of change, and negotiating agreements with decision makers and implementers. These activities are then followed by processes for enhancing and developing the necessary infrastructures, capacity building, reassigning resources and establishing accountability procedures (Adelman and Taylor 2007). The ETBs acknowledge that developing the supporting infrastructure to establish and ensure the long term capacity for continuous improvement is an iterative and developmental process.

Through the establishment of the ETBI-QQI Collaborative Forum, in the course of the 2014–2015 academic year the ETBs have embarked on this journey and the development of a new world class ETB QA Framework has commenced.

Technology-enhanced learning and eCollege

By **Michael Mooney**

Manager eCollege, SOLAS

Technology is playing an ever increasing part in everybody's daily lives. It has an impact on how we work and live our lives, from watching movies through services such as Netflix, to shopping through services such as Amazon, online grocery shopping, checking for information on Google or booking holidays and carrying out our banking. Education and training systems must respond to this new reality by equipping learners to effectively engage with and use technology, as well embedding new technologies into pedagogy, course design, curriculum and assessment.

National strategy for technology-enhanced learning in FET

During 2015, in partnership with Education and Training Boards (ETBs); learners; enterprise and other key stakeholders, SOLAS is developing a national strategy for technology-enhanced learning in further education and training (FET). The strategy will build on the expertise developed by FET teachers and tutors over the past fifteen years in using cutting-edge virtual classroom software to provide blended learning and fully online courses.

A particular initiative, eCollege (www.eCollege.ie) has been providing education and training courses in a fully online mode since the early 2000s. This article examines the impact of eCollege and how it has contributed to the development of technology-enhanced learning in Ireland.

What is eCollege?

A State initiative, eCollege has been in operation since the early 2000s, supporting over 90,000 people to upskill and reskill. Each year between 15-25 eCollege online courses are available in areas that include accountancy, web design, visual communications and project management as well information technology software development, networking and databases. Courses lead to awards at Levels 5-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications as well as to industry certification. Because they are fully online, eCollege courses are accessible from any location and at any time. They also accommodate the pace at which individuals want to progress. A 2014 survey of learners showed that 94% of respondents would recommend an eCollege online course to others.

"Each year, 15-25 eCollege online courses are available in areas that include accountancy, web design, visual communications and project management as well information technology software development, networking and databases."

"eCollege offers market-led courses free-of-charge to jobseekers, with technical and tutor support, exam vouchers and all the software and support learners require to achieve industry recognised qualifications and certification."
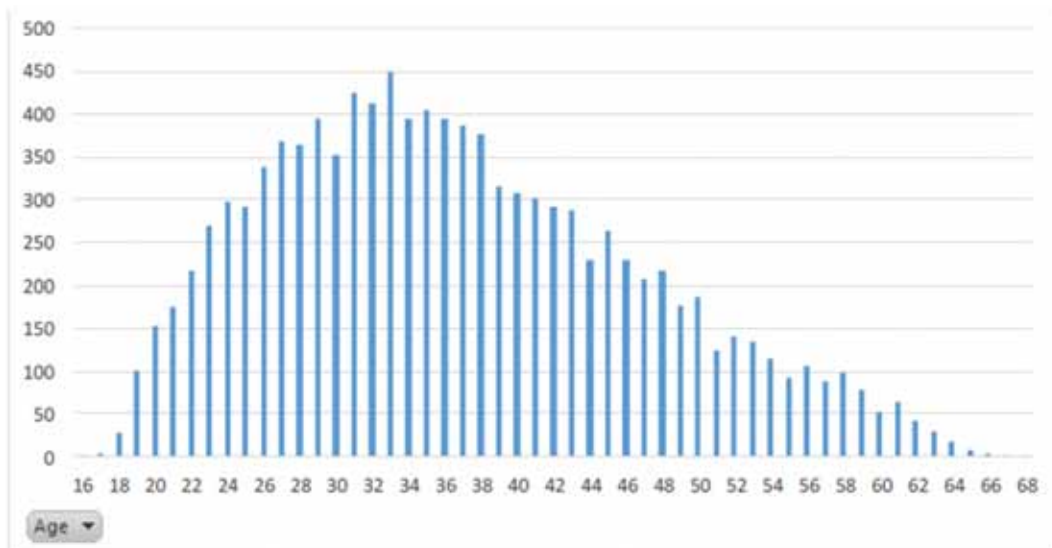
eCollege learners age profile (2014)

Who uses eCollege?

Education and training opportunities through eCollege are almost instantly available. Jobseekers engage daily with the Department of Social Protection, Intreo Employment Services offices around the country to seek education and training support. Within minutes of being registered for an online course, learners receive an email with an individual username and password and personalised support from their eTutor. By offering courses on a continuous intake basis, learners can start whenever they wish, and through shared systems between Department of Social Protection (DSP) system and SOLAS, eCollege provides a speedy and attractive opportunity to learners seeking flexible education and training. This flexibility meets the need of learners in remote locations, and/or learners who, for whatever reason, cannot attend an on-campus or full-time course.

eCollege learners come from a wide variety of locations, age, educational level and backgrounds. Of the approximately 11, 000 learners who availed of online courses in 2014, 55% were male and 45% female. The vast majority were jobseekers who received courses free-of-charge but an increasing

"At the end of 2014, eCollege commenced a tender process to contract one company to provide eTutoring, technical and administration support for all learners on all courses."

number of employed learners are also availing of courses. Employed learners pay a fee which is very competitive relative to other similar education and training provision.

Naheed Basri is completing the Accounting Technician Year 2 online course via eCollege and is a good example of a learner for whom online training has made a real difference. After spending 20 years raising her children she decided it was time to do something for herself. Being a full-time mother the online route suited her perfectly. She says:

I was particularly impressed with the weekly online virtual classes that allowed me to pause, rewind or fast forward to the particular part of the lecture I wanted to review.

Naheed reported that the support from her eTutors and the discussion groups with her

peers removed the sense of isolation and provided the support she needed to complete her course and prepare her to re-enter the marketplace once her children are raised.

eCollege offers market-led courses free-of-charge to jobseekers, with technical and tutor support, exam vouchers and all the software and support learners require to achieve industry recognised qualifications and certification. As the technology has advanced, eCollege has continually evolved so that it remains relevant to learners and to the industries in which learners wish to gain employment.

Cillian Smyth provided recent feedback on his eCollege experience:

> *I've been back in full time employment now for 4 years and the future is looking bright. I know that all of this would not be possible without the assistance and hard work of your staff. […] Keep up the good work, I can't thank you enough.*

eCollege contribution to growth and innovation

eCollege uses analytics software to monitor the IT systems, type of connection, software and browsers that learners are using to access eCollege courses. This information enables eCollege to continuously improve its delivery platform to meet learners' needs, not just in terms of ensuring browser compatibility but also to successfully introduce new technologies as part of course design and delivery. For example, in 2014 eCollege mainstreamed virtual classroom software in all courses. While this technology is not new, the lack of widespread high-speed broadband access meant that, until recently, only a minority of learners could take full advantage of this collaborative environment. Improvements over the past 2-3 years in Broadband and in Virtual

Classroom functionality provided the opportunity to launch this service as part of eCollege, and to substantially enhance the experience for learners.

The online learning environment used by eCollege was also updated in 2014 to include provision for individualised learning paths and a progress bar for each learner showing them a visual representation of their progress.

> "eCollege aims to be the most learner-centred, flexible online learning provider that it can be, complementing all of the post-secondary education and training provision delivered in Ireland."

For a number of years eCollege used contracted training companies to source eTutors for online learning support. At the end of 2014 eCollege commenced a tender process to contract one company to provide eTutoring, technical and administration support for all learners on all courses. Using one contractor will help to ensure that there is a consistent approach to the delivery and support for all learners. In addition it will assist in driving the continuous improvement of elearning that is at the heart of eCollege.

I believe the future is bright for technology-enhanced learning in further education and training. As part of the development work, eCollege aims to be the most learner-centred, flexible online learning provider that it can be, complementing all of the post-secondary education and training provision delivered in Ireland.

Nightmare in Ireland - and blissful delivery

By **Miss Nobody***

English Language Student from Brazil

Let me introduce myself, I am "Miss Nobody" from San Paulo in Brazil. By the time you start reading this article in December I will be back home in the sunshine. I have by now lived in Ireland for three years. I've visited 22 counties out of the 32 on the Island of Ireland. I have come to love GAA games and was so happy to be able to go and see a match in Croke Park, and experience how much fun it is.

> "I am delighted that I had the chance to meet amazing people - even though I was living in the parallel world created for English language students by the policies of the Irish Government."

I visited many museums and other places of interest in Ireland and learned some Irish History along the way. I know about Irish pride and I can now recognise some of the many Irish accents. I am delighted that I had the chance to meet amazing people – even though I was living in the parallel world created for English language students by the policies of the Irish Government.

Having been here all this time, I had to engage with the immigration services on a number of occasions, so let me outline my experience of this service to you. When you get your Visa renewed you also have to pay each time for a new GNIB card. The fee for this card used to be €150 but, a few years back, it was doubled to €300 without any explanation. Has any other fee in Ireland been doubled in this way? You may ask what this GNIB card is used for. The answer is:

your guess is as good as mine. If I go to a bank or anywhere else where I.D. is required, it is not accepted and I have to show my passport.

> "At the end of the day, the maths are easy. Work it out yourself: 300 tickets a day, €300 from each person - quite profitable for the Department of Justice, wouldn't you say? Do we not deserve to be treated with a little respect for choosing to study in Ireland and spending our hard-earned money in your country?"

Having paid €300 a year for a GNIB card, when it expires and I leave the country to return home they will take it from me. Can you imagine that? My most expensive souvenir and I won't even be able to bring it home with me. Each of us foreign language students pays €300 a year for this amazing public service; once a year we stand in line outside the immigration office from 3 am in the morning in the hope that we will be dealt with that day and we will get our ticket. Quite often, the official who appears after 8 am in the morning does not give you a ticket and you have to come back another day. There is no place for us to complain about this treatment at the immigration office itself or anywhere else for that matter. And, at the end of the day, the maths are easy. Work it out yourself: 300 tickets a day, €300 from each person – quite profitable for the Department of Justice, wouldn't you say? Do we not deserve to be treated with a little respect for choosing to study in

Ireland and spend our hard-earned money in your country?

Now to address the issue of English language schools in Ireland. As a result of very poorly drafted legislation and absolutely no regard for the protection of foreign students, twenty English language schools have in the past year closed down without notice. I was a student in two of them and lost a lot of money. I couldn't go to the Gardaí and open a complaint, they said that what had happened to almost 1,500 students was not a crime. We were told that the only thing we could do was take out a personal action against the owners of these schools, a very costly thing which virtually none of us can afford to do.

> "As a result of very poorly drafted legislation and absolutely no regard for the protection of foreign students, twenty English language schools have in the past year closed down without notice."

This situation has occurred because these schools were allowed to open as a result of very poorly drafted Irish laws. In other words, the Irish Government let people open unregulated schools and the only people to suffer in the end were the foreign students who lost their money. I was shocked at the virtual silence of your Taoiseach Enda Kenny and his government over this debacle. Foreign language students pay up to €3,000 to study English for six months, the same cost as the registration fee for Irish students to go to University. Consequently, we should have someone somewhere looking after us.

Let's set the record straight. Students seeking to learn English in Ireland are not here to get any state subsidy from the Irish government, we don't get a cent from them. We are here to learn English and discover your beautiful country. We have chosen to travel to and spend time in your country. We have heard about the Céad Mile Fáilte and we have come to experience it. We pump thousands of our hard earned Euros into your economy every year and all we ask

in return is to be treated humanely and offered protection from your government. I don't think that is too much to ask, do you? I imagine if Irish people suffered this abuse abroad, they would not travel as much as they do. Believe me, it is very hard to be seen, not as a human being, but rather as an open wallet without emotion.

In conclusion the only question left for me to answer: Is Ireland still a place with one hundred, thousand welcomes? Luckily for me I got to see that the actions of the immigration office and the Irish Government do not represent the Irish identity and the beliefs of decent Irish people. Many of these people were very shocked to learn about the treatment meted out to foreign students in Ireland. It is because of the wonderful times that I got to spend with these lovely, ordinary decent Irish people that I will keep my promise to tell my thousands of students, friends, and family in Brazil how amazing the Emerald Isle really is.

Finally I wish to express my deep gratitude to a few people (you know who you are) who came to my rescue in my hour of need, when the second language school where I was registered closed and my Visa had run out. These people worked tirelessly to secure me an extension of that Visa and secured me a free place in a private language school. I will be forever grateful to the owner of that college for offering me a free place as a consequence of my double misfortune.

Getting to study English in the environment of a high quality private college was life changing for me. It was fantastic to have highly skilled teachers and to be able, at the end of my course, to take the appropriate exams to secure me an internationally recognised qualification. I can now leave your wonderful country with positive memories at the end of a very difficult journey. Please learn from the debacle over the effective regulation of English language schools in Ireland so that others planning to study in Ireland don't go through the nightmare that I and thousands of other students experienced in the past year.

* The author wishes that her name will not be published.

Further Education and Training

Fuelling Ireland's Future.

SOLAS has been set up to fund, plan and co-ordinate the Further Education and Training Sector. Together with our partners, the Education and Training Boards, we are expanding how Ireland learns.

We believe that by providing a Further Education and Training Sector that is tailored to the needs of learners, employers and communities, we can harness the individual's skills, strengthen the economy and promote social togetherness.

And Further Education and Training is for everyone. Whether you're job seeking or seeking personal or professional development you can fuel your future.

For more information visit **www.solas.ie**

SOLAS

An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
Further Education and Training Authority

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Investing in your future
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Success for Ireland in WorldSkills Competition in Brazil

14 young apprentices, trainees, and students who represented Ireland at the 43rd WorldSkills Competition in Brazil scooped two Gold Medals, eight Medallions of Excellence, and an 11th place world ranking.

Pictured here is the team that represented Ireland in the 2015 WorldSkills Competition in Brazil.

New Apprenticeship Programme

A new Stonecutting & Stonemasonry Apprenticeship Programme was officially launched on April 2nd, 2015 by SOLAS, the OPW, and Kerry Education and Training Board (ETB). The event took place in Kerry ETB Training Centre, Tralee. The new programme will see apprentices work to preserve iconic heritage sites in Ireland.

Pictured at the launch of the new Stonecutting & Stonemasonry Apprenticeship Programme is stonemason xxxx

NALA Seminar

Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland and Patron of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), gave the keynote speech at a public seminar, 'Learning and life chances: promoting equality through basic education', organised by NALA and held in the National Gallery in Dublin. President Higgins said that the definition of 'literacy' cannot any longer be confined to reading and writing, but must also encompass the ability to understand and engage in many means of communication including spoken language, broadcast media, and digital media.

Pictured at a public seminar in the National Gallery, organised by NALA: Adult Learners Michael Power, Liz Corkish and Tony Moloney with President Michael D Higgins.

Promoting Equality

Other speakers at the public seminar, 'Learning and life chances: promoting equality through basic education', organised by NALA and held in the National Gallery in Dublin.

Pictured l to r: Speakers **Inez Bailey***, Director NALA;* **John Sweeney***, Researcher, and* **Áine Lynch***, CEO, National Parents Council Primary.*

*Pictured at the Whitehall College Further Education Open Day were (l to r): Teacher **Debbie O'Connell** with **Nathan Byrne** and **Jack Farrell**, students from Scoil Chaitriona, Mobhi Road, Dublin.*

Making The Right Choice

Whitehall College of Further Education in Dublin hosts a large range of programmes suitable for people who want to re-skill for the jobs market, or who wish to gain access to third level education. The college, under the direction of Principal Ann O'Reilly, aims to "enhance the educational experience for all students by constantly adapting to the requirements and needs of the student profile."

Ireland's first National Digital Week

Ireland's first National Digital Week took place in Skibbereen, Co. Cork, from 3-8 November 2015. The 4-day event was organised by Ludgate@Skibbereen, a not-for-profit initiative which aims to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Skibbereen and West Cork region. The first of its kind in a non-urban area in Ireland, the event featured over 60 world class speakers and workshops on the future of digital. Topics covered included Education and STEM, Female Entrepreneurship, Internet of Things, Farming 2030, Retail, and Industry 4.0.

Pictured here at the launch of National Digital Week are: (l to r top) **Bernard Byrne** *CEO AIB;* **Seán O'Driscoll** *CEO Glen Dimplex/ Ludgate@Skibbereen;* **Norah Casey** *Publisher and Broadcaster;* **Tom Hayes** *Divisional Manager of Enterprise Ireland;* **Louise Phelan** *Vice President of Global Operations at PayPal; (l to r bottom)* **Anne O Leary** *CEO Vodafone Ireland;* **Ronan Harris** *Vice President Google EMEA; and* **Dee Forbes** *President and Managing Director of Discovery Networks Northern Europe.*

chapter 5 | **Higher Education**

Chapter 5 **Contents**

The Higher Education Sector: Evolution and impact over the course of the year

By **Dr Eucharia Meehan**

Director, Irish Research Council

In a world of increasing access to news and an ever growing tsumani of communications, it is always difficult to foretell how a particular year will be remembered. So too in higher education and research but nevertheless I will attempt to summarise 2015. As for all publicly funded domains, the delivery of results, quality outputs, outcomes and impact was a key focus. Following from the publication of the first overarching System Performance Report and its presentation to Government by the HEA in 2014, surveys commissioned and published in 2015 – namely the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and the National Employers' Survey – continued to reflect a higher education system that is performing well.

> A key focus [of the year] was the delivery of results, quality outputs, outcomes and impact.

Mergers
From the perspective of the changing landscape of the system, several major projects are underway and well advanced, including e.g. the DCU Incorporation project (involving DCU and St Pats, Mater Dei and Church of Ireland College of Education), the incorporation of Shannon College into NUI Galway, as well as the progress of a number of institutes of technology which are involved in the planning of mergers as part of the process towards designation as Technological University.

The connectedness between all levels of education in this country, and the need to work more closely together, was a key theme throughout 2015. Articles in this publication deal with issues being examined in the context of transition from secondary level to higher education, with STEM education across all levels, and in this section a short piece on the potential to work together to improve educational pathways and outcomes. The growing connection between the higher education system and other global higher education systems also became ever evident, including Ireland's growing relationship with Brazil.

2015 was also an important year for research policy with the initiation of a process by the Minister for Skills, Research and Innovation Mr. Damien English T.D. to develop a new national Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation. There was a consultation process with all stakeholders and the process was overseen by an Interdepartmental Committee. The new strategy is due to be launched by year end.

Earlier in the year, the National Framework for Doctoral Education was launched with the support of all key stakeholders and Ireland's competitive success internationally in the research arena was highlighted with the release of performance data from the European Research Council. Data showed that Ireland had performed well in attaining these prestigious and extremely competitive Grants. In total 18 awards were won, of which 10 were won through the Starting Grant scheme; this result ranked Ireland second in terms of rate of success, rising from 20th position the previous year. Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, who was appointed Chair of the Irish Research Council

in 2015, stated that the result demonstrated the quality of individual researchers based in Ireland and noted that a significant number of ERC awardees had received support from the Irish Research Council in progressing their research careers.

2015 will however certainly be remembered as the year in which the approach of higher education institutions in implementing gender equality policies came under the spotlight. The HEA set up a review to examine the matter and the former EU Commissioner for Research and Innovation, Mrs. Maire Geoghegan-Quinn, was appointed Chair of the group. The report from the review is due by the summer of 2016.

> "As in recent years, the issue for funding for higher education and research continued to be the key area of concern."

Ireland's world ranking down
But as in recent years, the issue of funding for higher education and research continued to be the key area of concern. The overall trend for higher education institutions in Ireland was downward in the various world rankings, and while they are acknowledged to have flaws, rankings are also becoming an accepted part of the landscape of higher education. As such, they provide a window to the international community and prospective students, academics or employers considering Ireland as a location.

Ever increasing demand for college places
Furthermore, the rapid economic recovery now taking place means that more and more employers are looking to higher education to provide increased numbers of graduates to support their activities. While this is a hugely positive trend nationally, it places further strain on the HE system to meet these demands, particularly given resource constraints. To date, whilst the system is responding well, the ever greater numbers of students being enrolled each year points to a need to ensure that this expansion is

supported by a realistic funding strategy. In July 2014 the Minister for Education and Skills had established an independent advisory group chaired by Mr. Peter Cassells to consider the matter of future funding and sustainability. That group has undertaken significant work and consultation over 2015 and its report is due shortly.

New National Skills Strategy launched
As the year entered its final quarter, the Budget contained announcements for the funding of new Apprenticeships and for the development of Regional Skills fora. 2015 saw the largest Springboard offering, with 9000 places for jobseekers, and the Department of Education and Skills launched the consultation on a new National Skills Strategy in early November.

Shortage of student accommodation
As the year drew to a close however, one of the most pressing issues for students was accommodation, particularly when one considers the growing housing challenges nationally. A report has been submitted to the Minister on student accommodation and potential steps to address the current shortage; an interdepartmental and agency group is considering this further with a view to proposing appropriate recommendations.

Education is all about people
Whilst 2015 has certainly been a busy year, there is no doubt that 2016 will be a critical year in terms of policy decisions and implementation for the higher education and research system. With this being the case, it must be front and centre that higher education and research is at the end of the day all about people. It's about securing their future and our collective future. So let us, in the year we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising and collectively remember important voices from the past, ensure that it is also a year where 'the voice of our future' is heard.

The first Irish Higher Education System Performance Report

By **Fergal Costello**

Head of Systems Governance and Performance Management,
Higher Education Authority (HEA)

Higher Education has played a major role in Irish society – fostering the personal development of hundreds of thousands of students, and playing a critical role in economic and social development. It is a hugely dynamic sector, moving from a small number of universities with limited enrolments (as recently as the 1960s less than 10% of the age cohort accessed higher education) to a system today where around 200,000 full and part time student share enrolled in 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology and other smaller providers. It is a sector that is embedded in an international environment, with staff, students and increasingly funding coming from both international and national sources.

In 2009, the then Minister for Education sought to develop a longer term strategy for the sector, to take account of future challenges, and ensure that the sector would be well placed to continue to contribute to national development.

The strategy recognised that to do so, individual institutions would need to continually improve performance, in terms of the quality of the outcomes they delivered but also in terms of preparing for a much bigger HE sector, fed by both demographic pressures and economic demand. Indeed, the strategy estimated that the number of new entrants to the system would rise from 42,500 in 2009 to almost 68,000 by 2027.

Accordingly the strategy set out a vision for a system of higher education, made up of individual high performing institutions which explicitly identified and prioritised their strengths in certain areas, reflecting regional needs and institutional capacities. The Minister for Education and Skills would set out major national priorities to be addressed by the HE system[1]. In that context individual institutions would set their priorities having regard to their strengths and capacities, and particular regional needs. The HEA would engage with the institutions, and report to the Minister on the collective achievements of the sector and how well they met the national priorities. In the event that the system was not delivering to the full spectrum of needs, the HEA would intervene through its funding and regulatory leers, to steer the system towards those outcomes.

In 2014 the HEA published the first such system report for the Minister[2]. This was based on a series of compacts agreed between HEA and the individual HEIs, all of which are available for viewing on the HEA website[3]. The report, for the first time, presented a coherent perspective of the success of the system in delivering on the prioritised range of national goals. Notable findings from the report included:

» Participation and student numbers, the system continues to grow, meeting the needs of a growing cohort of school leavers, while also delivering for mature and part time students. The HEA report noted that this would be particularly important given the HEA view that the labour market had at that time begun to move towards growth in employment opportunities, and possible skills shortages.

» As part of that wider growth of the system, the opportunities for students from traditionally under-represented groups, such as from lower socioeconomic groups, or with disabilities had grown. However, there remained much work to be done to deliver more equal access to higher education for all sectors of society.

» Linked to this point has been the progress on the development of regional clusters of higher education institutions. This is a new innovation in Irish higher education, whereby groups of higher education institutions would plan collectively on key issues affecting their regions. These groups should also create links with further education providers, and in so doing facilitate pathways for students who may have chosen to initially participate in further education before seeking access to higher education.

» The report notes the rapid internationalisation of the higher education sector. This is most particularly evident in terms of the numbers of international student entering higher education where the projections from the institutions show a move from about 7% international enrolments in 12/13 to 135 in 2016.

» The report records the ongoing improvements in research performance in higher education. For example, the citation impact, a measure of how well regarded research is by international peers shows that Ireland has moved from .78 over the period 93-97, to 1.05 over the period 2000-2004, to 1.28 in the period 2007-2011. Ireland's universities are now in the top 1% of research institutions in the world, in terms of research impact, in 19 fields spanning Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and the Humanities[4].

» However, the report warned of the risks inherent in the system arising from ongoing significant falls in public funding, further exacerbated by the rise in student numbers. The report finds that funding per student has dropped from c. €11,800 in 2007/08 to c. €9200 in 13/14, and, on the basis of government expenditure forecasts and student numbers enrolments will fall further to below €9,000 per student by 2015/16. While recognising a range of efficiency measures ongoing in the sector around shared services, improved asset utilisation, as well as increases in private revenue entering higher education, the report warns that the future quality of the outcomes from higher education are under real risk.

The HEA is continuing the process of strategic dialogue into 2015. Of particular interest has been attention been given to the Irish process at a European level, and HEA has been invited on a number of occasion to set out the revised system for the benefit of other EU countries considering changes to their systems.

The HEA has recently competed a further round of engagement with the institutions, to assess their ongoing performance against compacts. The HEA will report again to the Minister in early 2016 on a further system report, describing performance across a range of indicators and highlighting particular areas of risk or challenge, together with any appropriate policy recommendations.

1. http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/1._revised_system_performance_framework_2014-16.pdf
2. http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/final_volume_i_system_report_with_cover_letter_.pdf
3. http://www.hea.ie/en/policy/national-strategy/higher-education-system-performance-2014-16
4. Thomson Reuters Essential Science Indicators, March 2014 update

BETTER TOGETHER

By **Professor Sarah Moore**
University of Limerick and Chair of the
National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
and **Dr Terry Maguire**
Director of the National Forum for the Enhancement of
Teaching and Learning at Third Level

Highlighting the potential for second level, further and higher education to work together to improve educational pathways and outcomes.

Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning commits to institutional collaboration across the sector as one of its underpinning values. While there is diversity when it comes to size, mission, student demographics and strategic focus in our higher education institutions, all of them share the same concerns when it comes to teaching and learning – concerns that have to do with the challenges of providing the best environment we can, sometimes under difficult circumstances, to help students to learn and develop.

> "Finding effective ways to bridge the gap and smooth the passage from second level and from further education to higher education is a collective challenge, and one that we would be better solving together."

Emphasis on collaboration across levels

The higher education sector has engaged in a variety of innovations that have attempted to transcend the boundaries of our institutions and to develop collaborative approaches to enhance the learning experiences of all our students. Some of the latest positive developments have included the initiation of the Irish Survey for Student Engagement, the launch of Ireland's first teaching and learning enhancement fund, and the publication of a digital roadmap for teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Collectively such developments enable the higher education sector to establish Ireland as a country where excellence in teaching and learning is an established norm.

> "A key issue that appears to remain at the centre of a lot of the progression and retention challenges in higher education is course choice."

Students struggle with the transition to higher education

In terms of effective student transitions – an issue of interest to all educators – recent Forum-funded research confirms many of the insights that have been highlighted in the past: Students from all backgrounds struggle with key challenges – challenges that fall into the following kinds of categories: increased personal responsibility, new social and personal contexts, logistical and financial difficulties, new and different academic skills (with the rules and processes of academic writing named as a specific obstacle that often feels insurmountable); large class settings; unrealistic or inaccurate expectations, and more (see for example Moore-Cherry & Quinn, (2015) – National Forum funded focused research project)

Innovations in second level and FET

Innovations and developments have not been limited to the higher education sector. At second level, issues of assessment, the integration of technology, professional development and the establishment of the

Centre for School leadership with a focus on leadership for learning are key priorities. The Further Education and Training (FET) sector has also recently been restructured and is now developing strategies to address the needs of their students and staff in relation to building digital capacity, professional development, programme accreditation and quality assurance and enhancement. FET students are targeted to make up 10% of the entrant cohort to HE in 2016, up from the current 6.6%. The FET Strategy 2014–2019 recognises that current developments within the HE sector offer potential for providing seamless progression pathways from FET to HE (SOLAS, 2014).

A collective challenge requiring cooperation of all levels

It is clear that all levels of education are facing similar and connected challenges. Finding effective ways to bridge the gap and smooth the passage from second level and from further education to higher education is a collective challenge, and one that we would be better solving together. Certainly, our challenges might be more effectively tackled by joining forces and sharing ideas at all levels in Irish education.

> "Many students cite a lack of adequate information about the content, processes, challenges and realities of the courses they have chosen."

Many of the emerging recommendations emphasise how transitions into higher education might be facilitated through active co-operation between the levels. As well as higher education supports, ideas about leveraging skills development during transition years, within the senior cycle and at other crucial times are being highlighted that at the very least might merit useful and productive discussions among all educational levels. A key issue that appears to remain at the centre of a lot of the progression and retention challenges in higher education is course choice. A mistake in

course choice and/or poorly informed choices are among the most frequently cited reason for students' failure to progress and drop out. This persistent finding may have strong implications in the context of resource pressure on career advisors, but there are also other possibilities to think about. Many students cite a lack of adequate information about the content, processes challenges and realities of the courses they have chosen. Clearly there is more potential to explore collaborative ways, and windows of opportunity in which these gaps in information can be addressed.

> "There are some second level subjects that make a much bigger difference in equipping students with skills for higher education than others. For example, our commissioned research (Denny, 2015) refers particularly to aspects of the history curriculum…"

Similarly, there are some second level subjects that make a much bigger difference in equipping students with skills for higher education than others. For example, our commissioned research (Denny, 2015) refers particularly to aspects of the history curriculum that seem to play a special role in equipping students for some of the challenges of higher level across a range of subjects.

> "Indications are that students entering higher education from the FET sector tend to adjust both more speedily and more easily to the challenges of higher education than their second level counterparts."

Initial indications are that students entering higher education from the FET sector tend to adjust both more speedily and more easily to the challenges of higher education than their second level counterparts. While some of this is attributable to the age profiles of FET students, much of it can be

traced to the kinds of experiences that are a more frequent feature of the FET experiences: regular presentations, writing reports, engaging in research projects, and certain kinds of focused, continuous assessment may help to explain the differences between further and secondary educational contexts (Denny, 2015). The Forum and the FET sector, in partnership, are currently engaged in further research to help understand the transition of FET student to higher education in a more complete way.

Technology: support or prohibitor of education?

The potential and risks of technology in learning also require a collaborative approach. Too often technology for teaching is seen as the holy grail on one hand, or as containing the seeds of Orwellian nightmare on the other. The answer lies somewhere between those extremes. Second level teachers have much to teach the rest of the sector about the effects of technology within and beyond the classroom, and about the ways in which constant access can support but also prohibit learning. A recent OECD report (OECD, 2015) highlights concerns to do with connectivity, concentration, learning and development and cautions that, '*…technology can amplify great teaching but great technology cannot replace poor teaching'* (OECD, 2015:18).

The transformative and effective ways that technology can be used by teachers and students to support learning need to be shared across all sectors of education. Currently second level, FET and higher education sectors are developing deliberate but separate strategies on this theme. We would all benefit from opportunities to share our experiences in relation to technology and how it can be harnessed to impact the learning of our students in positive and effective ways.

Potential for stronger links between second level, FET and HE

In exploring and discussing the above issues, one thing seems clear: higher education's links with second level and further education and training have the potential to become much stronger. The Leaving Certificate reform process recognises this, as does much research on non progression and student success – which underlines again and again the unsurprising truth that what happens at second level and in FET contexts has profound and lasting effects on what happens to those students who progress to higher education. There is huge potential for all education levels to work together to enhance student experiences and outcomes, and in doing so, to address issues to do with access, progression, retention, and the quality of the student learning experience.

> "The transformative and effective ways that technology can be used by teachers and students to support learning need to be shared across all sectors of education. Currently second level, FET and higher education sectors are developing deliberate but separate strategies on this theme."

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For more information about the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, see www.teachingandlearning.ie

1. National University of Ireland
   49 Merrion Square, Dublin 2

2. Tyndall National Institute, UCC

3. The Engineering Building, NUI Galway

4. UCD Veterinary Science Building and
   Hospital

5. York House, RCSI

6. Biosciences and Electronic Engineering
   Building, Maynooth University

Oilscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

The National University of Ireland
– Ireland's federal university

The National University of Ireland (NUI) is a federal university with campuses spread across Ireland and with over 250,000 graduates across the world. There are four constituent universities and a number of other associated colleges in the federation, making NUI the largest element of the Irish university sector. With their common history and traditions, the NUI universities and colleges contribute to social, cultural and economic advancement and share the following values:

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* welcoming international students
* nurturing talent, creativity and innovation
* generating new knowledge through intensive research
* sharing knowledge in partnership with industry, business and the community
* extending global reach through transnational partnerships
* creating opportunities for lifelong learning
* promoting civic engagement
* transmitting culture to new generations.

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The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE): Capturing the student experience

By **Kevin Donoghue**

Deputy President and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Quality Assurance, Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

Student survey enters its third year

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is the main vehicle for third-level student feedback in Ireland. It is sent to first and final year undergraduates and taught postgraduates in order to gather information on student engagement as part of their third-level experience. The Union of Students in Ireland is a co-sponsor of the project, along with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), and the Irish Universities Association (IUA). Piloted in 2013, the survey is entering its third full year in the 2015/16 academic year.

Understanding the student experience

Already, ISSE has helped tens of thousands of Irish students have their say about their educational experience. These experiences of engagement captured by the survey are helping to piece together a more complete set of intelligence surrounding the student experience than ever attempted in Ireland. As the project goes from strength to strength and the dataset is enriched, what we learn about the student experience grows.

> "A further benefit of the survey is its benchmarking of Irish student engagement data against international contexts."

The survey provides institutions with an intelligent picture of their students' engagement. There is nothing like ISSE in the Irish context and its uniqueness is precisely its value. As participation increases and the survey's clout builds, data can be used by senior management, academic staff, and students' unions alike to drive targeted enhancement initiatives in their respective spheres.

Take, for example, the index that measures student engagement with academic support services. Broken down to field of study level, individual institutions can assess their students' interaction with these services relative to the national average. If students are engaging less with support services than their peers in other institutions, what is the reason for this? Does it relate to a higher standard of teaching? Or are the support services for this subject perceived as inaccessible? The survey data can act as a resource to identify, develop, and monitor initiatives at all levels of the institution and to supplement work already underway.

HEI's seek to apply lessons learned from the data

The level of enthusiasm demonstrated by HEIs to date is encouraging. Following the publication of the 2014 report in November last, a report Effective Feedback and Uses of ISSE Data: An Emerging Picture showcased the variety of innovative ways in which diverse institutions have sought to apply the lessons of what their students have told them of their engagement. In this report, IT Tralee articulated an objective to "[take]

> "The survey provides institutions with an intelligent picture of their students' engagement."

advantage of positive experiences of students in particular areas in order to apply that practice to enhance the student experience on other areas." NUI Galway detailed how curriculum design is influenced by ISSE outcomes, and Trinity College Dublin outlined plans to use the data to support the Self-Assessment of the Code of Practice for International Learners.

Student leaders fully on board
From students' unions, we see a strong support for its continuation and helpful suggestions to further improve the survey mechanism and the quality of the resultant data. Student leaders recognise the unique value in capturing the student experience in this way, and how the exercise can be di-

> "Data can be used by senior management, academic staff, and students' unions alike to drive targeted enhancement initiatives in their respective spheres."

rectly fed into enhancement initiatives and activities in their institution. Moreover, such data contributes significantly to the task of representing student bodies that are often large and always diverse. This year, for the first time, students' unions will mark the launch of the annual report with a series of focused working groups aimed at identifying how student union policy, services, and campaigns can better reflect the profile of Irish student engagement as outlined by ISSE data.

Enabling international comparisons
A further benefit of the survey is its benchmarking of Irish student engagement data against international contexts. The survey indices were designed to allow for comparison with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE; United Kingdom) and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). In a context where institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom compete directly with Irish institutions for students, the importance of such comparisons should not be lost.

Incentivising students to complete survey
Despite welcome improvements to the survey, challenges remain. Student participation is increasing, but unevenly across institutions. For the survey to be truly representative – and regarded as such by the institutions – then the project partners need to collaborate to ensure that all institutions achieve a satisfactory turnout. In that context, we are lacking consensus as to the most effective way to incentivise participation, or even as to whether there is any single optimum way. To improve completion, the survey review group has recently approved a revised set of questions to take account of feedback on the length of the survey. USI's representatives to the project had raised concerns that students were starting but not completing the survey, and suggested that a shorter survey would address this.

> "Feedback reporting is slowly but surely becoming part of the fabric of the student experience."

Feedback reporting becoming the norm
As we approach the launch of the 2015 report next month, there is much about which to be enthusiastic for the upcoming 2016 survey. A streamlined set of questions and a growing recognition of the survey and its value among stakeholders should ensure that progress is maintained. The completion of the third full year will provide institutions with a genuinely reliable dataset that can inform future policy objectives and initiatives. Feedback reporting is slowly but surely becoming part of the fabric of the student experience and this is very welcome indeed.

Increased student numbers, an expanded geographical footprint, and additional programmes at Mary Immaculate College.

Mary Immaculate College, founded in 1898, is a university-level College of Education and the Liberal Arts, academically linked with the University of Limerick. The College now has a student population of over 3,500, enrolled in undergraduate programmes for B.Ed. and BA degrees and in a range of postgraduate programmes at Diploma, MA and Ph.D level.

The College's geographical footprint has also expanded with the recent announcement of the incorporation of St. Patrick's College, Thurles – another well-established College offering four degree programmes that prepare students to become second-level teachers.

According to **Minister for Education & Skills, Minister Jan O'Sullivan T.D.** said *"The announcement underlines Mary Immaculate College's pre-eminent role in the provision of initial teacher education in Ireland. The quality and dedication of teaching staff in the Irish education system is recognised internationally as one of our great strengths. MIC has contributed hugely to this positive aspect of education in Ireland and this new development will ensure that the College continues to go from strength to strength."*

Following the incorporation MIC will now offer a choice of nine under-

Fr. Tom Fogarty, current President of St. Patrick's College; Ms Jan O'Sullivan, Minister for Education & Skills; Mr. Alan Kelly, T.D., Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government; Prof Michael A Hayes, President of MIC pictured following the announcement that MIC is to incorporate St. Patrick's College, Thurles.

graduate honours degree programmes, for intake in September 2016. **MIC, St Patrick's Campus, Thurles**' four undergraduate programmes are specifically geared towards initial teacher education for the second-level school sector in Ireland.

MIC Campus, Limerick will continue to offer two four-year B.Ed. programmes, for those wishing to become a primary teacher (with the option of having a specialisation in Educational Psychology), a programme for those who wish to work in the area of professional childhood care and education, a Liberal Arts programme offering a wide array of subjects such subjects as Media & Communication Studies, Psychology, English; and an exciting new BA in Contemporary and Applied Theatre Studies. MIC will also continue to offer a host of postgraduate programmes to doctoral level in Education and in the Liberal Arts, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses, and numerous access and inclusion pathways.

For further information visit **www.mic.ul.ie**

COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH
MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

What do employers think of our graduates?
Survey suggests that employers are broadly satisfied but warns of future skill shortages

By **Conor Minogue**

Senior Innovation and Education Policy Executive, Ibec

It can be a struggle at times to fully understand employers' views on the quality of Irish graduates. The National Employer Survey – completed for the first time in Q4 2014 – is a welcome piece of new research in this regard and should help inform education policy in the years ahead.

Jointly undertaken by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and SOLAS, the survey captures employers' views on the overall quality of recent third level graduates and identifies the challenges they face in filling graduate vacancies and the factors considered in recruiting graduates. It also measures the level of engagement between employers and education providers.

Importantly, the survey recognises that "quality" can be a slippery concept to measure and adopts a nuanced approach, assessing graduates across a range of personal and workplace attributes.

So, what do employers think?
Broadly positive, the survey recorded high levels of satisfaction among employers with the quality of Irish graduates. Overall satisfaction with higher education graduates' workplace attributes was 72% and personal attributes was 90%. For further education and training graduates, satisfaction levels were even higher at 82% for workplace attributes and 90% for personal attributes. Satisfaction levels were higher again for large and foreign-owned businesses.

However, there were lower levels of satisfaction and engagement with education institutions among indigenous companies and SMEs. This is disconcerting. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been, and will continue to be, an integral part of Ireland economic development strategy. But we cannot neglect the needs of our indigenous companies and SMEs who are also a major source of employment.

It is also worrying that 40% of respondents indicated a shortage of skills that will be needed within the next five years including engineering, languages, ICT and specific quantitative skills. Employers also appear less positive about graduates' entrepreneurial skills, business acumen and commercial awareness.

We are not alone in this endeavor. Ireland is part of a global race for talent and competitor countries face the very same skills shortages and challenges. This gives Ireland an opportunity. With the proper investment and policy interventions we can steal a lead on our competitors and build an education system that encourages the right skills and attitudes to prepare our graduates for life beyond the classroom.

What are the solutions?
Investment is crucial. Our talent pool remains our key global competitive advantage and yet education spending has been cut in recent years. Ireland is one of only four OECD countries in which expenditure on tertiary education decreased since 2008. Demand exacerbates this problem further. By 2020 higher education institutions will need to cater for an additional 14,000 students.

Therefore, government needs to reverse damaging cuts and increase funding to

higher education institutions to upgrade buildings, ICT, specialist laboratories, workshops and equipment to meet this challenge.

Ireland has one of the highest participation rates in higher education in the EU. However, the current funding model of higher education is not sustainable. Government needs to introduce an effective student fees and income contingent loan system to underpin the sustainability of a high-quality higher education system.

As identified in the survey, specific actions are also required to address shortages in the availability of STEM skills. Ireland's engineering and high-tech sector has been a major employer in recent years and has helped pull the country through the economic crisis. Yet, the STEM skills gap means tech companies — both domestic and multinational —are required to source much of their talent from outside Ireland.

To its credit, the government and the education system have taken positive steps to address this problem. Initiatives such as the ICT Skills Action Plan, Project Maths, Springboard, Momentum, FIT, and bonus points for maths can help Ireland build future STEM skills availability. But focus needs to be maintained if we want to continue attracting high tech FDI and see indigenous tech companies achieve real growth and scale.

It is no surprise that employers also singled out language skills as a key requirement. It is estimated that over 75% of the world's population does not speak English and only 9% speak English as their first language. If we fail to cultivate foreign language skills in Ireland, the opportunities of this global market will not be realised. To this end, the government should establish a new Language Advisory Board to modernise and integrate language teaching in primary, post-primary and third level education.

Of greater concern is the survey's confirmation that Irish graduates lack entrepreneurial skills and business acumen. Employers in all sectors desire graduates that are work-ready, can adapt quickly to a changing environment, are open to risk, and can create value by spotting commercial opportunities and thinking creatively. While not everyone can or should be an entrepreneur, everybody can and should develop "entrepreneurial thinking".

Unfortunately, while there are a lot of noteworthy initiatives taking place throughout the country, they are all voluntary and we do not have a national policy or strategy to embed a culture of entrepreneurship into the education system from primary to third level. This will require investment, but it will also mean a change in how we think about and reward entrepreneurial talent.

> With the proper investment and policy interventions we can steal a lead on our competitors and build an education system that encourages the right skills and attitudes to prepare our graduates for life beyond the classroom.

The survey also suggests that there is scope for much deeper collaboration between education and business — SMEs in particular. While companies reported healthy levels of internships and work placements (72%), there were slightly lower levels of collaboration on research (34%), advisory panels (23%) and curriculum reform (15%).

Bridging the disconnect between SMEs and education will not be easy. But good work is already being done in this space. For example, it is hoped that the new Regional Skills Fora will enhance employer engagement with their local ETBs, institutes of technology, universities, skillnets and other stakeholders in building the skills of their regions.

The National Employer's Survey is an important initiative and its value to educators and policy makers will only improve in time as it begins to identify demand trends and a continuum on certain key metrics. For now, it is essential that we learn from the 2014 results and take proactive action to ensure our graduates can realise their potential in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

SUSI grants must be extended to private college students

By **Dr Diarmuid Hegarty**

President, Griffith College Dublin

General elections offer an opportunity for new policies and a fresh way of looking at challenges. And the biggest educational challenge of them all is how to cater for the growing numbers coming through the primary and second level schooling systems.

The majority of them will want to go on to college but, unless the next government tackles this issue, higher education will revert to catering for the minority only. And the reason is simple – we are not creating enough places fast enough to cater for the growing demographics.

> "We are not creating enough places fast enough to cater for the growing demographics."

In its final report, the Government's higher education expert group, headed by former ICTU general secretary Peter Cassells, said that we need to create 29% more places just to keep our present participation of 56%. Without this expansion it will drop back to nearly 40% of the relevant age group – which would be a disaster for students and parents, never mind the economy. The Cassells group, which was set up to look at funding, has put a one billion euro price tag on the extra money that must be spent to provide sufficient additional places – a 50% increase on current spending.

The biggest question is where will the places be provided? The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) believes that private colleges can make a significant contribution, and at much lower cost to the taxpayer. Private colleges cannot provide all the places that are needed, but they can go a long way towards meeting the rapidly escalating demand from school leavers and those who want to transfer to third level education from Post Leaving Certificate courses.

It is high time the role of the private colleges was acknowledged by the Government. A quarter of the 44 colleges in the CAO system are private colleges and their courses are clearly attractive to applicants. Yet too often these applicants cannot avail of the course of their choice as they are unable to get SUSI grants. This is discrimination.

It is not as if the government is consistent in its attitude towards the private sector. It is happy to encourage it in other areas of public life – transport, electricity, radio and television, training etc. But when it comes to the private sector in higher education, it takes what might be called a schizophrenic approach.

> "The biggest question is where will the places be provided?"

On the one hand, the Government encourages the private colleges to tender for Springboard contracts, which involves running courses for job seekers. The sector has performed very well in this area in the 2014–15 academic year, with private colleges securing a large number of Springboard contracts. In other words, the Government believed sufficiently in the quality of courses offered by private colleges to pay for students to attend these courses, knowing that, on graduation, the students would be better

prepared for the world of work. This is testimony to the value of the courses. Moreover, the government has no problem lashing out millions in SUSI grants to allow financially strapped students to attend third level colleges in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, where they must additionally take out students loans of Stg£6,000 – 9,000 per year for fees.

> "His [Mark Kane] action was begrudgingly settled out of court by the State granting him his full maintenance grant."

On the other hand, the Government refuses SUSI grants to hard pressed students who want to attend private colleges which are sometimes literally a stone's throw from where they live. Every year there are hardship cases where young people want to take courses that are available in a private college near home but cannot afford the fees. While private college fees are kept as low as possible, and financial assistance is given where feasible, free education for all comers is obviously not viable without Government funding, as in the public sector. At this stage, many are asking why the State does not give hard pressed students at least some assistance to attend State recognised courses where they want to – near home.

> "The patent unfairness of the situation where a SUSI grant is refused to students enrolled in private colleges in Ireland, but is available to them if they go to the UK, is simply not sustainable."

Such was his conviction of wrongdoing by the State and frustration felt by one student Mark Kane, whose family income consisted of his mother's disability allowance and his father's carer allowance, that he took the State to court in 2008. His action was begrudgingly settled out of court by the State granting him his full maintenance grant. The law was subsequently changed in the

Student Support Act 2010 to preclude such action by other students.

This discrimination also extends to students with disabilities who get substantial personal support in the form of grants to fund equipment such as hearing aids if enrolled in a public sector institution, but not if enrolled in a private college. One would have thought that the grant entitlement would follow the disability regardless of locus of study.

The patent unfairness of the situation where a SUSI grant is refused to students enrolled in private colleges in Ireland, but is available to them if they go to the UK, is simply not sustainable. One senses, however, that the inequity of this variation is beginning to dawn on fair-minded leaders in politics and government service.

Hopefully 2015-16, an election year, will see some developments towards fairness and equality in regard to grants for all learners.

The National Doctoral Education Framework:
Ensuring that Ireland has high quality, international standard doctoral programmes.

By **Dr. Barbara Dooley**

Dean of Graduate Studies and Deputy Registrar, University College Dublin

Background

The National Framework for Doctoral Education was launched in Dublin on June 24th 2015. The development of the Framework stems from a number of key documents including the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) and the *National Prioritisation Research Exercise* report (2011). Another key driver was the OECD review of Higher Education (2004), which recommended that Ireland would double its doctoral graduate output as part of a strategy to build world-class research teams, generate new knowledge and new innovations, and provide all economic sectors with a supply of skilled and educated graduates.

In order to achieve this goal a strategic, consistent, approach to doctoral education was required, which the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*[1] recognised in calling for the development of a consistent quality framework to enhance the international reputation and capacity of Irish higher education for doctoral education. This emphasis on quality saw Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) develop the Doctoral Education Framework in conjunction with key stakeholders including the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI) and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), to ensure that Ireland has high quality, international standard doctoral programmes.

The Salzburg Principles for Doctoral Training *(2005)*, embedded in the Irish Framework, emphasise that the core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research. At the same time, it is recognised that doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia by ensuring doctoral programmes consider the student's professional career development. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of institutions to articulate the optimum duration of a doctoral programme, and to put in place arrangements for supervision and assessment of the student. By adopting consistent principles, mobility can be increased geographically, as well as between disciplines and intersectorally.

The Framework mainstreams best practices in structured PhD programmes developed by Irish higher-education institutions. Its principles commit the key stakeholders in Irish graduate education and research to the highest standards in the provision of doctoral education and research. Key to the adoption of the Framework was the support from major funding bodies of doctoral education in Ireland, since a Framework adopted by the higher-education institutions which may be at odds with the major funding bodies would not be successful.

Framework Structure

The Framework is structured as follows: (1) Purpose; (2) Principles and (3) Outcomes.
2.1 The key purpose of the Framework is to underpin excellence in all forms of doctoral education in Ireland. The Framework sets out principles for doctoral education, which are cognisant of the diversity across the Irish higher education system and across doctoral programmes. In addition to the Salzburg principles (2005)[4], additional guiding documents included the Salzburg II

recommendations (2010)[5] and the European Commission 'Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training' (2011)[6], thereby ensuring that an adopted Irish Framework was inline with European and international standards. The Framework was designed to:

» facilitate consistent excellence in the quality of postgraduate research education and training;
» be an enabler for cross-institutional collaboration to enhance an improved learner-experience;
» maximise employability and underpin the international standing of the Irish doctoral award.

2.2 There are nine Framework principles. The first principle is that research is at the core of doctoral education. To be awarded a doctoral degree, the candidate must have made an *original contribution to knowledge.* Coupled with this is the successful completion and examination of the research thesis, where the work must be of publishable quality. Structured doctoral programmes should both deepen the students' understanding of their discipline and develop in-depth knowledge of research approaches, techniques and methods.

This approach is critical to the value of doctorates to the economy and societal gain. There should be sufficient critical mass of internationally recognised research activity in the learning community to ensure a high quality learning experience. In addition to this, there needs to be both high quality supervision and infrastructure.

In terms of processes that should be followed, it is essential that due care is given to the admission of doctoral students both in terms of the applicant but also that the institution has all the resources necessary for the research to be undertaken. While pursuing the degree, a set of established structures are required including:

supervision by a principal supervisor(s), normally with a supporting panel; formal monitoring of progress and clearly defined examination processes.

2.3 The doctoral outcomes are aligned to Level 10 of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications[7]. The Framework endorses the following skills and attributes, as articulated in the IUA *PhD Graduate Skills*[8] statement, as outcomes of Irish level 10 programmes:

» research skills and awareness
» ethics and social understanding
» communication skills
» personal effectiveness/development
» team-working and leadership
» career management
» entrepreneurship and innovation.

Summary
Through the National Framework for Doctoral Education, Irish higher education institutions are committing to embedding the constituent principles as indicators of a high quality doctoral education. In doing so, Ireland is at the forefront of establishing a national approach to doctoral education thus positioning itself as a leader internationally by establishing not only the core components of doctoral education, that of original research, but additionally a framework deeply embedded within a quality context. The ability to translate research into economic and societal benefits ultimately comes down to the quality of people working in the research system and the quality of the trained researchers emerging from the system at all levels and the National Framework for Doctoral Education can meet these outcomes. The successful embedding of the Framework will be facilitated by the establishment of a National Advisory Forum, whose agenda will reflect the purposes and principles of the Framework and will be developed collaboratively.

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European Research Council grants: a game changer for Irish research

By **Dr Patrick Prendergast**

Provost, Trinity College Dublin

Established in 2007, the European Research Council (ERC) was a response to intense pressure from European scientists to create a fund for excellent research across Europe, and to promote mobility of researchers between institutions.

Prior to the ERC, European funding for science came mainly through large collaborative projects involving consortia of researchers from at least three, but often many more, European countries. The ERC, on the other hand, funds individual scientists – Principal Investigators (PIs) – to pursue research where the excellence of the science, as opposed to the industrial application, is of the foremost importance.

The ERC forms part of the EU Research and Innovation programme called "Horizon 2020". It provides an excellent opportunity for researchers based in Ireland to win significant multi-million euro grants to pursue fundamental research. The research does not have to have immediate industrial applications. Also important is that researchers can get international recognition for their work at a variety of stages in their academic careers.

Trinity currently has 19 active ERC awards across all categories (See Table 1 on the next page).

In 2015, Trinity was awarded €14.5 million from the 2014 ERC grants round, representing some 46% of the Irish total. Examples of the research projects being funded are:

» Professor Poul Holm was the recipient of the only **Advanced Grant** awarded in Ireland in 2015. Valued at €2.5 million it represents the maximum amount of funding for an individual. The award will see Professor Holm and his team at the School of Histories and Humanities conduct world-leading humanities research into marine environmental history, assessing and synthesising the dynamics and significance of the North Atlantic 'fish revolution' of the 1500s and 1600s that reshaped alignments in economic power, demography and politics.

» Professor Anna Davies, was granted a **Consolidator Grant** of €1.9 million for 'SHARECITY', a research project that will assess the practice and sustainability potential of city-based food sharing economies. More than 50% of the world's population live in cities. SHARECITY will produce the first global study of emergent and burgeoning food sharing in cities – from redistributing surplus food from retailers to charities and community kitchens, to web-based platforms identifying surplus crops as potentially transformative means to shift urban food systems onto more sustainable pathways.

» Dr Sarah McCormack, was awarded a **Starting Grant** of €1.5 million. Her research looks at both direct and diffuse solar radiation in a static building component delivering not only breakthroughs in solar device

Table 1 *Trinity's current European Council Awards*

name	Applicant Profile	Max. funding	Aim	No. in Trinity
Starting Grants	2-7 years post-PhD	€1.5M + in well justified circumstances: an additional €500K of start-up costs/relocation costs/access to large equipment...	Supports up-and-coming independent research leaders. This is targeted at promoting early scientific independence of promising talent.	7
Consolidator Grants	7-12 years post-PhD	€2M + in well justified circumstances: an additional €750K of start-up costs/relocation costs/access to large equipment...	Supports researchers at the stage at which they are consolidating their own independent research team or programme.	4
Advanced Grants	10+ years post-PhD with an excellent 10-year track record	€2.5M + in well justified circumstances: an additional €1M of start-up costs/relocation costs/access to large equipment...	Supports researchers who have already established themselves as independent research leaders in their own right.	6
Proof of Concept Grants	Applicants must already hold an ERC grant	€150,000	Top-up funding open only to existing grant holders to bring their research ideas closer to market	2

efficiencies but also the development of unique building integrated components. Applying photovoltaic panels to buildings is important in achieving 20% renewable energy targets by 2020.

One of the characteristics of the ERC grants is mobility. Given that individuals can take awards with them to another university in a different country, competition to attract ERC awardees can be intense. Three awardees have transferred into Trinity and four have transferred out. Of those transferring out one went to another Irish university, one to a German university, and two to UK universities. One individual gave up an ERC award won while in Trinity to return to the United States.

Trinity's success in securing ERC awards shows that our research is addressing issues of global societal and economic importance. We aim to stimulate a wave of innovation that will stimulate jobs creation and generate long-term economic impact for the country. We have launched an Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy (see https://www.tcd.ie/innovation/ie-strategy/) to make this happen.

In recent years there has been effective partnering between government agencies and universities to maximise Ireland's return form Horizon 2020. We are seeing the results and this year has seen Ireland's best ever performance in the ERC. It has jumped from second-lowest ERC performer to second highest. Only Israel performed more strongly in per capita terms.

It is clear that research in Ireland remains strong, but mainly based on infrastructure investments made prior to the economic downturn. As the economy improves it is now time to further invest in science so that Ireland can do even better in the competition between universities globally for talented researchers. We will need to continuously improve our reputation as a location where research can be performed to the very highest international impact.

Scientists, engineers, and humanities researchers with original ideas are the foundation for innovation. Through world class education and research, they are the key to creating wealth and sustainable jobs. In the competition between cities and regions for talented researchers, Irish universities serve the dual role of both attracting talent to Ireland, and developing it within the country. They are a key driver for Ireland in successfully developing reputation for an innovation economy.

> "Sharing and collaborating demand new skills: - the capacity to engage with peers across a range of disciplines, to respect yet challenge methodologies and research paradigms…; and more systematic management of data and workloads to ensure harmonious co-operation."

University Presidents are very conscious of the importance of ERC awards; however they are only a part of the picture when it comes to funding successful research. Nor is it forgotten that universities have a wider purpose than this as they act to serve the public good in a time of rapid social and economic change.

Further information on Trinity College Dublin's current active grants is available at
https://www.tcd.ie/research/expertise/

International Education – the impact of collaboration with Brazil

By **Miriam Ryan**

Head of International Education, Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)

In just 3 years Ireland has moved from having a handful of Brazilian students in our higher education institutions, to having hosted over 3300 students in a variety of institutions across the country.

The unprecedented increase in numbers from Brazil is due a Brazilian Government sponsored programme "Ciência sem Fronteiras" (Science Without Borders) that seeks to promote the internationalisation of science and technology, innovation and Brazilian competitiveness through student exchange and international mobility.

The programme provided for up to 101,000 scholarships over four years and 2015 represented the final allocation of students worldwide under this phase of the scheme. At undergraduate level students are funded for one year of study abroad, with extensions granted for 3 month internships at the end of their study. The programme also seeks to attract researchers from abroad who want to settle in Brazil or establish partnerships with Brazilian researchers in the priority areas outlined in the program, and create opportunities for researchers to receive specialized training abroad.

> "A Brazilian Government sponsored programme, Science Without Borders seeks to promote the internationalisation of science and technology, innovation and Brazilian competitiveness through student exchange and international mobility."

Institutes of Technology have hosted over 1500 students on the programme to date, the majority in engineering and related fields. This has generated tuition fees in excess of 15 million euro to the sector, in addition to accommodation costs, English language tuition and student living costs.

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) has welcomed some 320 undergraduate students on the 'Science without Borders' programme since 2013. The students have performed well academically and over 80 of the students have extended their stay to take up industrial placement with Waterford based companies, or engage in research projects with some of the Institute's leading research groups.

The students have been a great addition to campus life and, outside of the lecture halls, have integrated very well into many

TOP 10 DESTINATION COUNTRIES OF SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

USA	27,178
UK	9507
France	7212
Canada	6757
Germany	6535
Australia	6007
Spain	4304
Italy	3880
Portugal	3780
Ireland	3350

SOURCE: CAPES (Brazilian sponsor and funder of the programme) September 2015

of the Institute's clubs and societies. For example, the Brazilian students played a key role in WIT's success in intervarsity soccer in 2014 and in securing the national volleyball title in 2015. There are many similar examples throughout the institutes of technology.

The 'Science without Borders' programme has been a catalyst for expansion of the Institute's academic partnerships with Brazilian universities leading to the development of agreements with 12 top universities. "These agreements have led to the establishment of joint research projects in the areas of Engineering, Telecommunications, Information Technology and Health Science and, it is hoped will form the basis for sustainable relationships with our Brazilian partners in the years ahead," commented Don O'Neill, Senior International Officer at WIT.

Research Brazil – Ireland
A major initiative from the Irish HEIs was the establishment of Research Brazil Ireland (RBI) which brought together Irish third-level institutions and research centres as a consortium to drive a coordinated national approach highlighting Ireland's attractiveness as an international research partner. The objectives of RBI are to:

» Encourage the exchange of researchers between the two countries
» Facilitate work on joint Brazil-Ireland research proposals
» Develop new links with industry in both countries
» Ensure Irish and Brazilian research collaborations are strategically positioned to take advantage of European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 funding

Showcasing events and workshops were organized in both countries to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas and the development of joint proposals relevant to priority areas of both countries across five thematic areas:

» Information and Communication Technologies

» Environmental Science and Technologies
» Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology
» Biopharmaceuticals, Biotechnology and Health
» Sustainable Energy and Agroproduction

This strategic cooperation was financed by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) which has designated Brazil as a priority country for research and education partnerships.

The first Brazil Ireland Science Week was held in Dublin in February 2015. The conference provided a platform that brought together researchers, higher education institutions, funding agencies, policy decision makers and industry leaders to discuss how to strengthen existing links between Ireland and Brazil and devise strategies to facilitate greater future cooperation.

Some examples of Institutes of Technology research collaboration with Brazil.
Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) has signed Memoranda of Understanding with both **UNESP** and **UNICAMP**, two of Brazil's leading universities, laying the groundwork for future research collaborations and joint funding applications. CIT delegations have visited, and presented guest lectures, at UNESP and UNICAMP, showcasing CIT's cutting edge research programmes in Science and Informatics, highlighting CIT as a strong academic partner and attractive destination for Brazilian students at postgraduate level.

> "Institutes of Technology have hosted over 1500 students on the programme to date, the majority in engineering and related fields. This has generated tuition fees in excess of 15 million euro to the sector..."

Researchers from the NetwellCASALA research centre in Dundalk Institute of Technology have visited Brazil, establishing relationships and collaborations with their

counterparts. Prior to the visit, Netwell-CASALA, alongside researchers in DCU, DIT and NUI Galway, formed a working group with researchers from the International Longevity Centre (ILC) in Rio de Janeiro, with the aim of exploring common themes of interest centering on age friendly technologies. Following the visits, Netwell-CASALA will seek funding opportunities to support strengthening the working group and collaborations formed, as well as to work on collaborative projects in the area of age-friendly technologies to support wellbeing. The group will also target the H2020 EU-Brazil call in 2017.

> "The first Brazil Ireland Science Week was held in Dublin in February 2015."

Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) is building strong international partnerships which will further enhance the educational experience of their students and staff and contribute to the development of their city and region. In 2014, LIT signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Universidade Federal San Joao del Rei (UFSJ), a highly rated Brazilian University. Since then LIT and UFSJ have been involved in a wide range of cooperation and collaboration including joint research activities and were successful in securing three Government of Ireland Scholarships' for 2015/2016 for research collaboration between UFSJ and LIT academics.

> Through our work to date Ireland is now viewed prominently as a leading study and research destination in Brazil.

IOTI Brazil Masters Scholarship Scheme 2015/16

In March 2015 during a visit to Brazil, the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan T.D., announced a new Institutes of Technology Ireland scholarship scheme valued at €150,000 for ten Brazilian students to come and study further in Ireland.

The purpose of the scholarships is to build on the success of Brazil's Ciência Sem Fronteiras programme by inviting Brazilian students to return to Ireland to undertake Masters programmes. The participating institutes of technology will waive all tuition and registration fees for ten scholarship recipients, and each will also receive €5,000 towards accommodation and living expenses.

> "Brazil has demonstrated a tremendous belief in the power and value of international education and research collaboration."

Speaking on behalf of Institutes of Technology Ireland, CEO Gerry Murray said

"The Presidents of the Institutes of Technology have been unanimous in their praise of the Brazilian students that have come here under the *Ciência Sem Fronteiras* programme. The ten scholarships now being offered mark a strong desire of the Presidents to recognise the contribution made by the students, encourage them to return, and to build even stronger connections between the two countries."

Challenging times ahead

Brazil has demonstrated a tremendous belief in the power and value of international education and research collaboration. The economic downturn in Brazil now poses challenges for the future of their ambitious programmes. Ireland has been at the forefront of collaboration with Brazil and has welcomed thousands of their students and researchers in the past few years. Great work has been done to build strong relationships with Brazilian HEIs and we hope that with the support of the various Government agencies on both sides these relationships will continue to flourish and grow. Through our work to date Ireland is now viewed prominently as a leading study and research destination in Brazil.

Awards to support the teaching and learning of Irish by US citizens

By **Dr Dara FitzGerald**

Executive Director, Fulbright Commission of Ireland

The Ireland-United States Commission for Educational Exchange (Fulbright Commission) manages a number of Irish language activities on behalf of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. In all cases, such activities seek to foster teaching and learning Irish language and culture between the United States and Ireland.

Summer Gaeltacht Immersion Programme for US and Canadian citizens

"*Dia dhuit, cén chaoi a bhfuil tú?*, delivered with no trace of an American accent. This was how I was met in August this year. The speaker was a US citizen and the occasion was an awards ceremony for nineteen Americans and nine Canadians who had completed a Summer Gaeltacht immersion programme.

In total sixty-seven had completed the programme in different locations in Irish Gaeltacht areas. These students of Irish hailed from US States such as Oregon, California and Maine with backgrounds in biology, ecology, economics, music, romantic linguistics and Celtic studies.

The aim of these awards is to support Irish language learners and teachers coming from the US. This immersion experience includes not only Irish language learning but excursions, traditional Irish music and storytelling in some of Ireland's picturesque locations. *Táim cinnte go mbaineann siad idir thaithneamh agus thairbhe as.*

Irish Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) grant

The Fulbright Commission, with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, supports an Irish Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) grant for Irish citizens, or EU citizens resident in Ireland for three or more years, to teach Irish and take classes at a college in the United States over a 10-month period. A strong link exists between the Fulbright FLTA awardees and Gaeltacht Summer awardees insomuch that some of the Americans would have been taught or introduced to Irish by the FLTAs.

Fulbright award is prestigious in the US

Irish FLTA Fulbrighters are respected awardees who spend almost a year at one of a number of Universities and Institutions in the US that provide Irish language and culture courses to US students. Examples of these institutions are New York University, the University of Montana and the University of Wisconsin. Often, these courses fulfil a language requirement taken up by students with no experience in Irish language and culture.

In the course of their time in the US the FLTAs engage in a multitude of activities that merge Irish culture with a US experience. The Fulbright award is prestigious and instantly recognised in the US; and as such leads to a host of opportunities. At orientation, before they leave Ireland, FLTAs are asked to accept new experiences and are encouraged to expand their capabilities and be an ambassador for Irish language and culture.

67	US Irish summer school awardees in 2015
Fulbright Irish Foreign Language Teaching Assistantship (FLTA) awardees in 2015	**9**
44	Immersion days taught by Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTA's)
US immersion weekend students enrolled	**322**

Past Fulbrighters

Past FLTA awardees encourage getting out of the comfort zone, "never say no" (not the official line). Indeed, I have spoken with **Éilis** who taught Irish as she had expected and set up an Irish music course which was unexpected. **Naoise** (from Kilkenny) established a University hurling team which went on to win the US collegiate hurling league, mainly comprised of US players taught to play that season. Others include **Cillian** who used Fox News to create local news snippets. In 2015, nine Fulbright Irish FLTAs were selected to teach Irish in institutions across Connecticut, Idaho, Indiana, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington D.C. Successful candidates ranged from graduate students to primary school teachers, 3rd level tutors, and other professionals.

Teaching Irish to non-University groups

Through funding from the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Irish FLTAs in the US are offered the opportunity to travel to non-University groups which teach Irish all over the US. Typically these FLTAs travel to an Irish language group for a concerted weekend of teaching the Irish language. Students on these immersion courses are oftentimes so eager to learn from FLTAs that they forgo lunch-breaks to squeeze out every possible morsel of Irish language teaching. Compression immersion. Over the last year a total of forty-four days of immersion teaching fed the

Irish language appetite of three hundred and twenty two US students. During the academic year 2015–2016 we will be sending FLTAs in US to cities such as Dallas, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Butte, Portland, Phoenix and Kansas City to teach and quench the increasing thirst for Irish language in the US.

Promotion and Outreach

Promotion of the Fulbright Irish FLTA programme in Ireland occurs through general promotion of Fulbright Commission awards, in particular during the open call for applications from the end of August to the end of October 2015 (see www.fulbright.ie). In September 2015 a focused event was held in Dublin to increase awareness of the Irish FLTA award through outreach to the teaching and Irish language community. Outreach and promotion to Gaeltacht areas is becoming a priority as applicant numbers from these areas are often limited.

Online

Additional undertakings being developed include online resources for teaching Irish in American universities, in local conversation circles or online Skype groups connecting with each other across the US, and in immersion weekends becoming available in new venues across the country.

Speaking of the FLTA's, Aodhán Mac Cormaic, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, said:

"When departing for the United States, these young, energetic and talented graduates bring with them, not only the Irish language, but their unique culture which, in the Ireland of the early 21st Century, is a distinctive blend of the traditional and the modern."

"Their love for their culture is infectious and immediately rubs off on those who cross their paths during their time in the US. Their enthusiasm has resulted in the establishment of community initiatives beyond the gates of the university – new GAA clubs, Irish conversational groups and weekly traditional music sessions to name but some."

School of Education

NUI Galway has been involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision- in the area of Post-Primary Teacher Education- since 1915. The School of Education, NUI Galway offers a range of initial teacher education programmes for pre-service, post-primary teachers, and continuing professional development and research programmes for teachers and educators across: primary, secondary and tertiary.

At graduate level, in consecutive, initial teacher education for post-primary sector, the school provides the:

- **Professional Master of Education (PME)**
- **An Máistir Gairmiúil san Oideachas (MGO)** for education through the medium of Irish

These are 'new' two-year masters level graduate teacher qualifications available from September 2014.

In collaboration with the School of Mathematics, Statistics and Applied Mathematics (NUI Galway) the School of Education offers a concurrent, undergraduate teacher education degree:

- BA Mathematics and Education, which qualifies graduates to teach Mathematics and Applied Mathematics to honours Leaving Certificate level in post-primary schools.

For the continuing professional development of experienced, practicing teachers and educators the School of Education offers:

- Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (supported by the Departments of Education and Skills)
- Master of Education (MEd), which combines coursework and research
- To cater for the diverse range of teachers' professional practice needs a flexible modular CPD framework is available. On completion of each module (10 ECTS) participants are awarded a Professional Credit Award. A **Postgraduate Diploma in Leading Learning** will be awarded to teachers who accumulate six such awards (60 credits).

The School of Education facilitates several modes of research study at **Masters (MLitt)** and **PhD l**evels; there are fulltime and part-time options available for both. The School's areas of research interest and expertise include:

1. Initial and professional teacher education
2. Educational Leadership
3. Socio-cultural issues in education
4. Science, Technology and Mathematics Education (STEM)
5. Integration of ICT into Learning and Teaching.

For Further Information on the School of Education, NUIG Contact:
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Digitisation and research in the humanities in Ireland: achievements and challenges

By **Professor Mary E. Daly**

President, Royal Irish Academy

The launch of the Digital Repository of Ireland www.dri.ie in June 2015 is a significant landmark in the mainstreaming of digitisation for the arts and humanities in Ireland.

The Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) – which was funded by the Irish government's programme for research in third-level institutions – is a consortium of universities and colleges and national cultural institutions, which is led by the Royal Irish Academy, with the goal of building a trusted digital repository for HSS (Humanities and Social Sciences) research in Ireland. The launch means that Ireland now has a trusted digital repository for its social and cultural heritage, and for the HSS research – a twenty-first century counterpart of the national library, national museum and national archives – with the technical capacity to provide comparable curatorial facilities and long-term preservation.

> "The Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) is a consortium of universities and colleges and national cultural institutions, led by the Royal Irish Academy, with the goal of building a trusted digital repository for Humanities and Social Sciences research in Ireland."

DRI enables Irish HSS researchers to meet the Open Access requirements of research funders, and to participate in large international collaborations. The demonstrator projects, which were designed both to test DRI's technical capacities and to encourage other projects/institutions to ingest their content into the DRI, include life story interviews, artwork, collections of letters and ephemera in both English and Irish. During this pilot phase, DRI has also partnered with a range of digital projects; the most significant of these is the digitisation of the audio-visual archives of Ireland's national television and radio service – RTE, where DRI is working with the INSIGHT Centre for Data Analytics – a multi-million investment, which includes six of Ireland's seven universities.

It is no secret that the Ireland has experienced several years of austerity, which has had a significant impact on funding for research and higher education. Nevertheless there has also been a dramatic growth in the volume and range of digital resources relating both to history and culture and contemporary society. The current decade of anniversaries and commemoration – of the Great War, Easter 1916 Rising, and Ireland's war of independence – have provided an impetus for several significant digitisation projects.

The Irish revolution is perhaps the best-documented of all twentieth-century revolutions. The Bureau of Military History www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie provides online access to 1,773 statements, plus photographs and interviews collected between 1947 and 1957 from men and women who were involved in the revolution. This is currently being supplemented by the phased release of files documenting the pension applications by those who fought in the 1916 Rising and later war of independence, or their dependents. www.militaryarchives.ie

The impact of these collections is already evident in the proliferation of local and national studies of these years, and the emergence of a 'history from below' that complements and revises previous accounts. But one might argue in such instances, digitisation is merely enabling more widespread and more user-friendly (searchable) access to sources; that it does not in itself transform the research landscape.

The potential of digitisation to transform or expand HSS research is more evident in other fields. During the 1990s and 2000s, major motorway development, and a construction boom, resulted in unprecedented archaeological excavations throughout Ireland. The resulting mass of excavation reports presented a major challenge for researchers, because the evidence demanded a major reappraisal of early and medieval Ireland. This reassessment would not have possible without digital resources enabling the mapping and classification of excavation results[1].

> "For the scholar, digital data bring new challenges in terms of research culture and working relations."

A booming economy also resulted in the first significant inward migration since the late seventeenth century, and the emergence of long-distance commuter towns – forces that combined to bring about the most dramatic changes in the ethnic and socio-economic profile of Ireland, at both national and local level, since the great famine of the mid-nineteenth century. Linkages between GIS and a range of government data have made it possible for social scientists to analyse this new socio-economic profile in microscopic detail, identifying areas that are experiencing above-average levels of deprivation[2]. The digitisation of the Stowe Missal – one of Ireland's greatest medieval manuscript – has refuted the traditional view that this was the work of several hands https://www.isos.dias.ie/. We can now say

with confidence that there was only one scribe – a statement that would not have been possible without digitisation.

Yet this digital revolution is not without its challenges. While digitisation spells 'the death of distance', enabling Irish-Americans to search for their ancestors in the online 1901 or 1911 Census without leaving home, for the scholar digital data bring new challenges in terms of research culture and working relations. While archaeologists have a long history of collaborative research, which encompasses fellow archaeologists and a range of other scientific disciplines, the sole scholar has long been dominant in many other humanities disciplines. Yet the true potential of digitisation may only be realised by collaborative research that crosses both disciplinary and geographical boundaries, with access to shared research data. Sharing and collaborating demand new skills: – the capacity to engage with peers across a range of disciplines, to respect yet challenge methodologies and research paradigms common to other disciplines; and more systematic management of data and workloads to ensure harmonious co-operation. This has implications for the training of early-stage researchers and their supervisors and mentors.

One of the major successes of DRI has been the partnership between researchers in third-level institutions, and the arts and cultural sector. The erosion of boundaries between the two sectors is a welcome development. Yet this fruitful partnership presents funding challenges because Irish government funding mechanisms find it difficult to accommodate projects that do not fit easily within a specific department. The challenge for DRI, and for other digital research outputs, is to ensure its sustainability and to ensure that their potential is reflected in the wider culture of research, doctoral education and funding models.

1. Aidan O'Sullivan, Finbar McCormick, Thomas R. Kerr, Lorcan Harney, Early medieval Ireland A.D. 400-1100 The evidence from archaeological excavations (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy 2014).
2. Gerry Kearns, David Meredith, John Morrissey, (eds), Spatial justice and the Irish crisis (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2014) See also http://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/nirsa/

New undergraduate curriculum at Maynooth University

Minister for Education and Skills **Jan O' Sullivan TD** *and Maynooth University President,* **Professor Philip Nolan**

Maynooth University's new undergraduate curriculum was launched in March 2015 by the Minister for Education and Skills Jan O' Sullivan TD and Maynooth University President, Professor Philip Nolan. The new undergraduate curriculum features increased flexibility, allows study across arts and sciences, prioritises languages, and offers a radically different first-year experience.

Key components include:
- Innovative teaching and assessment challenging students to analyse, reflect, think critically, communicate clearly and work in teams.
- A unique first year programme combining lectures with small group learning.
- Fewer and simpler entry CAO entry routes, making choices easier and allowing students to specialise either immediately or over time.
- Greater flexibility and choice, with the ability to take major and minor options within most degrees
- New and interesting subject combinations, including subjects across the arts and sciences.
- Ability to pursue a modern language alongside any degree.
- Elective options outside a student's core discipline.
- Extensive opportunities to learn outside the classroom through accredited co-curricular activities such as work placement, volunteering, or study abroad.
- Electronic portfolios to capture students' cumulative achievements over the course of their degree.

DEMOCRACY'S BEGINNING: THE ATHENIAN STORY

By Thomas N Mitchell; Published by Yale University Press

The very first democracy, established in ancient Greece over 2,500 years ago, is the bedrock on which every democratic system created since is founded. That first democracy radically transformed life in ancient Greece, introducing law and order to a populace that had suffered cruelly under anarchic dictators.

In his latest book, Professor Thomas N Mitchell tells in lively fashion the full and remarkable story of how the radical new political order (democracy) was born, how it took hold in ancient Greece, evolved over 200 years, and collapsed under the invasion of the powerful Macedonians.

Professor Mitchell's superb history includes an exploration of the nature of the Achilles heel that hastened the demise of Athenian democracy.
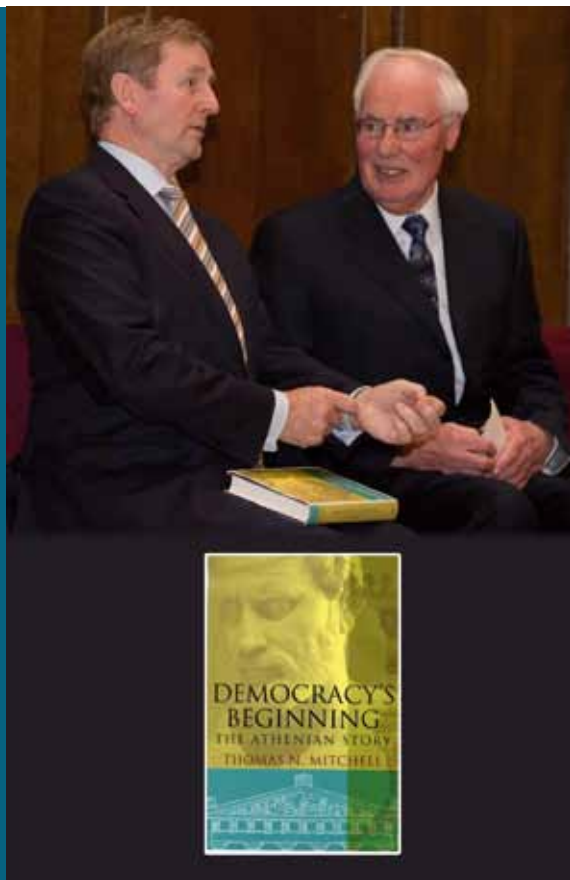
Pictured at the launch of DEMOCRACY'S BEGINNING: THE ATHENIAN STORY, written by Professor Tom Mitchell, former Provost of Trinity College Dublin, and published by Yale University Press, are (r to l): An Taoiseach **Enda Kenny TD** *and the author* **Professor Tom Mitchell**. *Photo by Paul Sharp, SHARPPIX*

Young Universities Summit 2015

Dublin City University hosted the second annual Times Higher Education (THE) Young Universities Summit in April 2015. The event brought together young academic institutions that are the rising stars and future powerhouses of education and research globally.

Pictured at the Young Universities Summit 201, l to r: Professor **Brian MacCraith** *President of Dublin City University (DCU), with Ms* **Jan O'Sullivan** *Minister for Education & Skills, and Professor* **Bertil Andersson** *President of Nanyang Technological University.*

All Ireland Scholarship Scheme

The All Ireland Scholarship scheme was established in 2008 by JP McManus to support gifted young students across the island of Ireland by giving them extra financial support to enable them to participate in all aspects of college life during their third level education.

Pictured at the 2015 All Ireland Scholarship Awards ceremony at UL on Saturday, November 21 (back row l-r): **Pat Dowling**, *Trustee;* **Jan O'Sullivan TD**, *Minister for Education and Skills;* **Dr. Stephen Farry MLA**, *Minister for Employment and Learning;* **AP McCoy**, *Guest of Honour;* **Prof Roger Downer**, *Trustee;* **Gerry Boland**, *Trustee; (front row l-r): Scholarship winners* **Eoin Corcoran**, **Owen McKeown**, **JP McManus** *Sponsor,* **Anna Kern** *and* **Áine Collier**.

Conference on Mobile Technology in Teacher Education

The First International Conference on Mobile Technology in Initial Teacher Education (MiTE), hosted by NUI Galway in January 2015, celebrated the possibilities and explored the challenges of integrating mobile technology in teacher education.

Pictured l to r: **Seán Ó Grádaigh** *School of Education NUI Galway, Conference Organiser;* **Dr William Rankin** *Apple Inc, Keynote Speaker;* **Dr. James J Browne**, *President NUI Galway;* **Sinéad Ní Ghuidhir** *School of Education NUI Galway, Conference Organiser;* **Professor Punya Mishra** *Michigan State University, Keynote Speaker.*

Success for Dr Noel O'Connell

PhD graduate at Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and member of the deaf community, Dr. Noel O'Connell was successful in his application to the highly prestigious Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme for his project 'Belonging: An auto ethnography of a life in sign language'.

Pictured here are (l to r): **Prof Michael Healy**, *Associate Vice President of Research, MIC;* **Dr. Rebecca Breen**, *Research and Graduate School, MIC;* **Dr Noel O'Connell**; *and* **Dr. Gerard Downes**, *Research and Graduate School, MIC.*

Research

Research **Contents**

Integrating Technology into Post-Primary English Education

By **Dr Eilis Flanagan**
Doctoral Research Scholar at NUI Galway (2011-2015),
Post-doctoral Researcher (Horizon 2020), SU Enterprise Award-Winner, 2nd prize

My doctoral research explored how technology can be integrated into post-primary English education to augment students' engagement with literature. Research in this area suggests that students are disengaging from learning and literature learning in post-primary education in Ireland due to an over-emphasis on rote learning practices and the constraints of high stakes, summative assessments (Chief-Examiner 2008 and 2013, Hyland 2011, Smyth 2009, Smyth et al. 2006). Further, the potential of ensemble-based pedagogy, multimodal texts, technology-enhanced learning and digital content creation can render learning experiences more engaging, dynamic and creative (Dowdall 2006, Kress 2003, Livingstone and Haddon 2009, Neelands 2009).

> "I believe in the fundamental importance of affording students the opportunity to bring their life experiences, prior knowledge and emotions to the learning experience."

In my time teaching English to post-primary students, I have been privileged to experience wide ranging learning styles, abilities and attitudes from my students. In my first year teaching I experienced an unnerving dichotomy between what I thought were 'easy to teach' students and the 'difficult' classes. I endeavoured to understand why these students refused to comply with my content-driven, notes-wielding teaching style that was so appropriate to the context of the examination-focused Irish education system. During a subsequent conversation with one of my students about this issue the student said to me: 'ah sure we're different, we don't just learn it off'.

> "These students needed to experience content and learning, rather than being faced with a forest worth of notes to internalise and regurgitate."

I revisited the question I had been pondering all year: What was wrong with those uncooperative, bored and lacklustre students who refused to learn? The answer was horrid; it was their teacher, more specifically my generic teaching style. Abruptly, I realised that there is no 'one size fits all' pedagogical garment into which every shape and size of intellect, ability and learning idiosyncrasies can be moulded. These students needed to experience content and learning, rather than being faced with a forest worth of notes to internalise and regurgitate.

This realisation of 'we're different' may sound obvious, simplistic and somewhat naive but to me it was a defining moment in my teaching profession where I challenged my own perceptions of teaching and learning and evermore endeavoured to be respondent to the changing nature of people

and how we experience life and learning. I believe in the fundamental importance of affording students the opportunity to bring their life experiences, prior knowledge and emotions to the learning experience and make their own meaning from the literature. Of particular interest to me is the potential of drama pedagogy and technology to encourage students to engage with English literature. Research in this area intrigued me and so, I excitedly accepted a doctoral research candidacy at NUI Galway in 2011.

The primary focus of my research was to explore the effect of digital ensemble pedagogical practices on students' engagement with literature. The term 'digital ensemble' was used to describe the process of combining mobile technology (i.e. iPads) with drama activities to augment students' engagement with English literature. In drama, the ensemble process involves a cast rehearsing a script collaboratively, thereby distracting the spotlight from any one individual performance (Gibson 1998). In his manifesto 'Stand Up for Shakespeare', Michael Boyd (2008) suggests that the kinaesthetic approaches of ensemble employ active strategies to help learners engage 'directly and physically with the words and rhythms of the text [so that] complex thoughts and language start to make sense to young people and invite instinctive and personal responses' (p.3).

With regards to technology, the *EU Kids Online: Final Report* (Livingstone and Haddon 2009) challenged Prensky's (2001) belief that our young people can cultivate the affordances of modern technology since they are the 'digital natives' of our time. This report suggests that there is a growing necessity to educate young people vis-à-vis the creative and productive uses of technology and new media in a manner that benefits their learning and nurtures a sense of civic mindedness and identity creation (Livingstone and Haddon 2009, p.27). Within the context of English education, I considered the potential of 'low threshold applications' (LTAs) to enable and encourage students to embody literature, both physically and virtually (Gilbert 2002). With regards

"The primary focus of my research was to explore the effect of digital ensemble pedagogical practices on students' engagement with literature."

to pedagogical integration of technologies, digital storytelling is a powerful teaching and learning tool that encourages creativity, productivity, critical thinking and the improvement of multiple literacy skills (Robin 2006). A digital story can be described as the combination of storytelling as an art with digital multimedia and LTAs to create a dynamic assemblage of personal learning experiences. Therefore, digital ensemble storytelling is the educational use of mobile technologies to augment ensemble pedagogies to encourage students' engagement with literature. Consequently, my research goal was to explore how digital ensemble pedagogy can be designed and integrated into English literature learning at post-primary level within a senior cycle classroom.

To address these questions I developed a cyclical Design-Based Research (DBR) study, undertaken on a longitudinal basis, over four years and three design cycles with two post-primary schools in the West of Ireland. The research was conducted over a total of 15 weeks and 85 teaching hours, generating approximately 107 hours of video data. 131 senior cycle students, aged between 15 and 17 years, participated: 45 students in cycle one, 46 students in cycle two and 45 students in cycle three. Data collection methods included

video recordings, student feedback questionnaires, group interviews, student artefacts, evaluation rubrics and ethnographic observations.

I used my theoretically informed design framework, ENaCT, to explore systematically the design and implementation of the digital ensemble intervention with students. ENaCT comprises the four design criteria for developing digital ensemble in the classroom, which are ensemble, narrative, collaboration and technology. The research cycles involved the implementation of ensemble activities such as freeze frames, choral reading, blocking, thought-tracking and whoosh storytelling to enable students to embody critical moments or characters within a text. In their groups, students recorded their collaborative embodiments using an iPad and organised their vignettes into a digital portfolio on the device. Then each group utilised the iMovie application to storyboard, plan, draft, construct and edit a digital ensemble story of their collaborative embodiments of the texts.

"A significant impact of this research for the English classroom context was the development of a short course for the newly implemented Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) programme in Ireland."

The students' digital ensemble stories portrayed supreme in-depth knowledge of textual content such as plot, characters, thematic resolution and language use across a range of multimodal texts. Their use of ensemble to create aesthetic, authentic and reflective vignettes was original, creative and thought provoking. Mobile devices supported collaboration and encouraged students to interact with one another in a meaningful and experiential manner. Affording students a social and collaborative environment in which to learn was a contributing factor to the impact of this digital ensemble process on students' positive learning experiences. In the Irish context collaborative education is a developing concept but one that holds potential for creating dynamic learning experiences (Smyth et al. 2011, Smyth and McCoy 2011).

A significant impact of this research for the English classroom context was the development of a short course for the newly implemented Junior Cycle Student Award (JCSA) programme in Ireland. This course, entitled ENaCT-It, enumerates the process of utilising digital ensemble in the classroom. Further, my ENaCT prototype design model, which emerged from this research, describes the criteria and design informants for designing, implementing and evaluating digital ensemble to augment students' engagement with literature.

"I have developed a deeper understanding of how innovative, collaborative and aesthetic classroom practices can enhance our students' learning."

This Ph.D. learning journey has been inspirational and challenging throughout the last fours years. I have developed a deeper understanding of how innovative, collaborative and aesthetic classroom practices can enhance our students' learning. Being fearful of adopting such collaborative practices is natural but it is vital to muster the courage to take risks for the sake of our students' learning and positive educational experiences. After all '[w]e have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition' (Eliot 1921).

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Dr Flanagan's PhD research was supervised by Dr Tony Hall, Editor of Education Matters Yearbook 2012–2014.

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Teachers' Beliefs about Play in Infant Classes in Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

By **Dr. Jacqueline Fallon**

Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin

A quiet revolution is underway in infant classrooms in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Many teachers have attended courses focused on the pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning advocated by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). These pedagogical approaches can be summed up as play and playful practice. The level of interest in courses about play indicates that many teachers are in sympathy with the teacher who said that '… the way we are doing it [teaching] isn't optimum for children of that age'. There is, as yet, no empirical evidence of the extent to which these pedagogical approaches are gaining traction in primary schools, but change is certainly afoot.

With the forthcoming publication of the revised Language curriculum (NCCA, forthcoming), which has absorbed the pedagogical messages from Aistear, the momentum will increase. To date, engagement with change towards playful pedagogies has been voluntary but with the revision of the PSC, play and playful pedagogy will have a more mainstream presence. Change is dependent on what teachers think and do (Fullan, 2001). If playful pedagogy is to be embedded in infant classes on a system wide basis – as distinct to the current volunteerism – information is needed on the current state of teachers' attitudes towards the desirable pedagogies.

> "[T]eachers recognise the importance of play in a child's life, both for wellbeing as a child and for learning."

While there has been very little research information available on practice heretofore in infant classes, the information we have indicates that practice has been overly formal and didactic, with children spending considerable time at desk based work with limited opportunities for interaction, active play based learning, or talk and discussion (OECD, 2004: Murphy, 2004a/2004b). While the evidence base was limited, it was consistent. One of the limitations in the information available was the almost non-existence of research explaining why the state of affairs as described should exist. In particular, there is little reference to teachers' own perspectives on why this very formal practice should be so prevalent, or to explanations as to why play provision is so limited. This study provides insights into the reasons why teachers choose to pursue more formal approaches and, more importantly, their perspectives on the introduction of play provision in the infant classroom.

Focus groups were held with teachers of infant classes from a wide range of school types and geographical areas. Despite the diversity of teaching contexts, a remarkable level of consensus emerged among the research

participants. Teachers who were already making provision for play in their classrooms believed, for example, that parents in other schools would be concerned if their children were not using text books in 'big school'.

The research shows that teachers recognise the importance of play in a child's life, both for wellbeing as a child and for learning. Children's agency in play is an important value, and there is concern evident for those children who experience difficulties engaging with play. Teachers

"Change is well underway in infant classrooms, but to sustain the process, the primary school system has to adapt to accommodate play."

perceive that children's opportunities for play with other children outside the home are being reduced because of concerns about safety and the proliferation of technology. However, while play is valued as a positive contribution to children's lives, the data clearly demonstrates that the participants identify a range of features of our primary school system which render it inhospitable to play and playful pedagogies.

The research indicates that adopting and implementing play as an approach to teaching and learning in infant classes represents a risk to teachers across a range of dimensions and for a number of reasons. Teachers' believe their professional reputations could be at risk, a finding which also emerged among teachers in Northern Ireland (Walsh and Gardner, 2006) because play is an invisible pedagogy and is seen as recreation for children. Consequently, they perceive a risk of censure from a range of stakeholders, chief among them, parents.

Teachers see their professional responsibilities in terms of two types of accountability: 'accountability to' and 'accountability for'. 'Accountability to' involves a range of stakeholders: parents, the Inspectorate and other teachers. While relationships with parents are very good, the data is very clear that teachers believe that parents expect their children to experience conventional practice in school. There is also agreement that considerable work would be needed with parents to educate them about the significance of play in a child's life. There is considerable uncertainty among teachers about the position of the Inspectorate on play provision in the classroom, in the absence of explicit endorsement of play pedagogy. The data also demonstrate that teachers in infant classes feel accountable to those teachers who teach more senior classes in terms of having the children inducted in academic learning processes. Principals have an important role in protecting teachers from censure from other stakeholders, and such protection is characterised as extra 'permission' for teachers to introduce playful pedagogies.

Teachers are very aware of their responsibility to account for children's learning. They express concern about whether assessment can be achieved in the play context, given the challenges of tracking each child's learning through play in the context of large classes and individualised learning. They are concerned about the challenges of planning play, ranging from the complexities of integrated, thematic planning to the requirement to plan curriculum objectives for an open learning context like play. There is evidence of tension between the teacher's responsibility to progress curriculum objectives and allowing the children to lead the play, and there are also suggestions that the teacher's unwillingness to cede control may be a contributory factor in that tension.

The research strongly suggests that teachers are very positively disposed to play, but clearly locate the difficulties in making provision in the classroom in various aspects of the school system. Stakeholder groups and their repre–sentatives need to explicitly endorse play provision in the infant classroom. Teachers themselves identify teaching assistants as a crucial support in play provision, as well as comprehensive training in play and playful pedagogies for all teachers, not just those in infant classes. Change is well underway in infant classrooms, but to sustain the process, the primary school system has to adapt to accommodate play.

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	Keyfacts
1	Teachers are demonstrating considerable interest in introducing play and playful pedagogies into the infant classes in primary schools.
2	Uncertainty about stakeholder attitudes towards play in the infant classroom is a source of concern to teachers.
3	The school system based on 12 Curriculum subjects, and the associ-ated accountability processes, is not hospitable to play pedagogy, and this view is held whether play is introduced or not.
4	Teachers identify classroom assistants and training, among other things, as crucial supports for play pedagogy in the infant classroom.
5	Teachers are demonstrating considerable interest in introducing play and playful pedagogies into the infant classes in primary schools.
6	Uncertainty about stakeholder attitudes towards play in the infant classroom is a source of concern to teachers.

Principals must 'bring people with them' in implementing change

By **Dr Michael Redmond**

Research & Development Officer with the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) & Deputy Chairperson of Ireland's National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). His doctoral research focussed on the emotional dynamics of principalship in Ireland's voluntary secondary sector.

A 'whole school approach' is required of school leaders by almost every new educational initiative and the new Junior Cycle Framework is a prime example of this. As the journey towards a new Framework has been a fraught one, the key task for principals in implementing this change is not to use rational strategies alone but to 'bring people with them'.

It is unreasonable to expect that overburdened principals will retreat from their roles to comprehend and discover how to implement models of effective change-management across their practice. What is feasible however is that practitioners are encouraged to develop their own 'microtheories of action' that, when organised into a pattern, represent an effective strategy for change management.

The aim of this article is not to set out yet another effectiveness-enhancing formula but to identify emotionally-attuned cognitive learning strategies which can set a pattern of successful behaviours.

Heller (1982: 86) identifies that bridging the gap between insight and action, and interrupting automatic behaviour patterns, are two of the hardest tasks in creating effective learning. He proposes a three-component heuristic, or 'mini-program', which can be used to replace a current behaviour pattern:

1. A 'flag' which alerts us to when the heuristic should be used
2. A 'recognition' of what is really happening in the situation, and
3. A 'prescription' of how to act in the situation

The heuristic can be very powerful because the individual can go beyond the recognition of ineffective or counter-productive behaviour to follow through with more effective action (Smith, 1983: 58).

I am proposing that a heuristic such as Heller's which involves assigning meaning, planning, and only then enacting, may be rendered significantly more effective if it also incorporates the affective at the levels of situation recognition, meaning-making and planned action. If recent research into the affective landscape of principalship in Ireland demonstrates anything, it is the pervasive nature of emotionality in decision-making and action at every level of the real-time lifeworld of the school. The importance of this emotionality needs to be recognised. Incorporating an intelligence around feelings, one's own and others', into microtheories of action has the potential to enrich and add power to the mental models principals might use to support effective decision-making. Such a heuristic is presented as '*Situation – Sense – Say*':

Situation:
Not all scenarios demand deeply insightful responses and, with practice, school leaders will develop discernment skills allowing for an awareness of when to interrupt their automatic behaviour patterns to slow down and deploy a more situationally appropriate response.

Sense:
Moving beyond the cognitive to incorporate emotional understandings of a situation is at the heart of effective problem-solving, though this is not to polarise either dimension as both are essential. At the early stages of practice however, using two sentences, one of 'thinking' and a second of 'feeling', will support the emergence of a more holistic and appropriate response at the action stage.

Say:
Principals, though always active, will sometimes declare 'I don't do things, I get things done'. They achieve results, immediate and longer-term, largely by effective advocacy. In situations such as staff meetings demanding intensively reflective and collaborative processes, what the principal says and how he or she says it is assigned great significance by staff and impacts on eventual outcomes. For principals, therefore, saying is acting.

Let us take for example the management challenge presented in secondary schools in Ireland when, in October 2012, the then Minister unilaterally announced the abolition of the Junior Certificate examination. Resistance at teacher union level was compounded by a difficult industrial relations atmosphere generated by pay-cuts, and principals were now responsible for implementing significant curricular change with little support or ownership at school level. The scenario has of course been overtaken by subsequent events, but it is employed here to exemplify how a school leader might use the proposed model.

A successful approach to such change-management will not reside in reliance on a small in-school implementation group, however composed or motivated. The governing values that guide behaviours and actions across the whole school must first change and, as Heller advises, 'it takes hard effort, practice and commitment to accomplish that level of change' (ibid: 119).

That said, there exists some value in imagining an approach which would begin with a diagnosis of both the new curricular demands and the capacity of the school to meet them. In the present example, a key capacity lies in *the willingness or otherwise of the teaching staff to implement the new programme.* A principal with a sensitised staff might begin with the following heuristic:

When Demands and Capacity Conflict

Situation: When imposed compliance with policy threatens staff cohesion

Sense: *Think:* My teachers agree cognitively with the need for curricular change but there exist significant barriers to implementation

Feel: Threatened and angry people entrench – imposing change now will lead to cycles of resistance

Say: 'Let's use this entire term simply to have conversations. I will ensure we get the facts we need and we'll worry more about getting this change right rather than on time'.

Such contextualisation is essential as individuals within the school are best placed to make judgements about how to resolve its problems. Incorporating an awareness of emotionality adds to the power of such analysis and is more likely to avert ineffective behaviours such as direct policy compliance or opposition.

Once the non-threatening 'conversation phase' has progressed (and hopefully the industrial relations atmosphere has improved), the principal may continue with further tentative steps aimed at generating an internal commitment to freely-chosen change on the part of the teaching staff. To achieve this objective, the processes of sharing valid information, its public testing, and advocacy might helpfully be supported by further use of the heuristic:

Resolving Irresolvable Conflict

Situation: When win-lose arguments emerge

Sense: *Think*: That staff need some alternative method for overcoming this impasse and this will demand a carefully thought-out strategic approach to its resolution

   Feel: They are hugely sensitised to this issue and will need to know they have advocates in the solution-seeking process

Say: 'Let's call a meeting of assistant principals to gather information and explore possibilities for action'

followed by:

Keeping a Focus on the Problem

Situation: When participants are likely to generate emotive distractions

Sense: *Think*: That factual information is less likely to be challenged and will support rational discussion

   Feel: They will still need to vent but once this is over, they will need some structure to focus on as feelings will remain high

Say: 'Let's generate and share a discussion document which will clarify the issues at stake and begin the process of finding a way forward'

At a later stage, the staff will need to be brought together to explore possibilities but large-scale plenaries are unlikely to be productive:

When Abstractions may overpower Specifics

Situation: When the plenary will not generate solutions

Sense: *Think*: My teachers are pragmatists and will focus better on tangible, local scenarios as opposed to negative, national-level abstractions

       Feel: The quiet ones will not feel it is safe to speak in the plenary as the negative voices will inevitably dominate the discussion

Say: 'Let's take specific examples of how this might work at our school and discuss these in small groups during the meeting'

Such a nuanced approach to collaborative change-management may, to the outside observer, appear to present as infantilisation of a group of professionals who should be prepared to implement national policy directives without question. It is, however, due to their very professionalism that teachers resist externally-imposed change. Industrial relations aside, educators' innate conservatism and tendency to re-set can stem from an inclination to defend children from the vagaries of politically-driven change efforts. Neither outright opposition to, nor unquestioning acceptance of the new curriculum represent effective action and the tasks for leadership are (a) to begin to make the case that the new is a significant improvement on the old and, (b) to systematically make clear over time the mismatches between the desired outcomes and current practices.

Cognitive rules alone will fail to achieve these goals and the explicit integration of emotionality into the principal's actions will not alone become a tacit theory-in-use but has the potential to become mirrored across the institution as individuals learn to generate cumulative change and actualise the potential within themselves and their organisation.

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Research reveals schools shelving student care in favour of grades

By **Dr. Liam Harkin**

Guidance Counsellor at Carndonagh Community School, Co. Donegal
Dr Harkin previously worked as a Development Officer in the National Centre for Guidance in Education. He completed a Doctorate in Education at St. Patrick's College DCU in 2015.

My recent doctoral thesis is an exploration of the way in which the change from an ex-quota to an in-quota guidance allocation system in 2012 has impacted on affective care, student wellbeing and student support in second-level schools. The new arrangement stipulated that guidance hours, which hitherto had been assigned according to national Government policy, had now to be provided from within a school's teacher allocation, with individual school principals bearing responsibility for deciding on the *"appropriate guidance"* allocation. This has resulted in a reduction in counselling time in schools in the Free Education System (FES) despite the huge demand, while counselling time in fee-charging schools has not been reduced.

The vital importance of student care

Sociologists such as O'Brien (2005, 2008) argue that as schools offer possibilities for well-being and development, it is necessary "that emotional care be carried out and received" (2008, p. 103) in schools. O'Brien views emotion as an essential resource needed in caring professions, and found that students require an investment of emotional care resources particularly during periods of educational transition: *"In order to care we have to engage our emotions and emotional resources are required by the carer"*. One of the reasons O'Brien (2008) gives for the need to invest in emotional resources was the *"increase in mental health challenges faced by young people"* (p. 88). She lists depression, suicide, aggression and anti-social behaviour as some of the prevalent issues in adolescent lives, particularly among those groups who suffer from social exclusion. She argues that *"interrupting poor mental health as soon as possible is necessary for positive living during adolescence"* (p. 73).

> "[There has been] a reduction in counselling time in schools in the Free Education System… , while counselling time in fee-charging schools has not been reduced."

Irish model of guidance counselling

Irish guidance counsellors are well positioned to provide such supportive care, given the strong psychological foundations of guidance in Ireland. Guidance in schools *"encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance"* [DES, 2005, p.4], while in-school counselling includes *"personal counselling, educational counselling, career counselling or combinations of these"* [ibid]. Indeed, from the mid-sixties in Ireland, the role and influence of psychologists was *"significant"* (Cassells, 2006) and *"important"* (Murray, 2013, p. 41) in the development of the Irish model of guidance, with a firm emphasis in

training on psychology and counselling (Teeling, Hussey & Casey, 2013). It is not surprising then that over four decades, counselling became an intrinsic and significant component of the Irish school guidance service. In research conducted before the impact of the guidance allocation changes, Hayes and Morgan (2011) reported *"a huge demand for counselling among second-level students and not enough resources currently available to meet their needs"* (p.79).

Importance of resources for quality

Good care requires adequate resources (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004; Lynch & Walsh, 2009) and as personal relationships form the basis of care, there is a limit to how far these resources can be stretched (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009):

> It is unlikely therefore that society can reduce the total amount of time devoted to caring labour across the whole economy without damaging the quality of care provided. An example of this aspect of equality is the educational sector, where the desire to reduce the ratio of teachers to children is sometimes put forward as an economic efficiency objective (p. 20).

Moreover, if the time available for caring is reduced, then the quality of the care work is compromised:

> Each human being is indivisible in terms of his or her person. She or he is not able to bi-locate and most people have a limited capacity to complete more than one task at a time. The way care is organized therefore is deeply bound up with time and space. It is governed by the rules of finiteness, and by the limitations of energy and resources (Lynch et al., 2009p. 41).

You're fire-fighting, you just do what you can.

Negative emotions such as stress impact on the quality of care provided, and guidance counsellor stress is increased by role conflict. As Dunham (1984) opined, *"it is hard to be fairy godmother and wicked witch"* (p. 27), and balancing the disciplinary role of a teacher with the caring, supportive, image of the guidance counsellor was difficult and increased stress.

In-school care systems have been largely dismantled

With regard to in-school care provided by guidance counsellors, my research thesis has five main findings. These are outlined below, illustrated with comments chosen from the 273 survey respondents and 12 interview participants.

1. The distribution of care in schools in the Free Education System (FES) was negatively affected as time for counselling was reduced, despite huge demands. In fee-charging schools, counselling time was not reduced. As the demand for counselling in FES schools grew, prioritisation became necessary, and the service became a reactive crisis intervention one: *"It's a bottomless pit, it's really a case of prioritising, you're fire-fighting, you just do what you can"* [Violet in a rural DEIS, ETB Community College].

2. Many FES schools prioritised student academic achievement and teaching over guidance, with guidance counsellors removed from guidance duties and given an academic teaching timetable. This is indicative of the peripherality of the emotions in education in general, and the focus on the rational, the intellectual and the academic: *"I have been reduced from full time to 4 hours 40 minutes and I am expected to fulfil the role – as well as take responsibility for RSE. I am frequently called upon to lead crisis interventions. My title has been changed from Guidance Counsellor to Careers; I find myself on the periphery of pastoral care (excluded from meeting, but called upon when there's trouble)"* [respondent 186].

3. Vulnerable students, those needing transition supports, and those with mental health issues experienced compromised care in FES schools, due to a large reduction in counselling appointments. The demand for counselling in FES schools increased, but as many schools prioritised career guidance, preventative counselling disappeared: *"Doing emergency counselling on corridor between classes. When I ask students why did you not come to me sooner they tell me 'you were too busy', this is very sad"* [respondent 191].

4. As the quality of affective care is closely linked with resources of time, it was impossible for guidance counsellors in FES schools to provide a professional guidance service, with many quality indicators not being met, such as a lack of counselling follow-up; difficulties in referral to other agencies; difficulties finding time to write up counselling notes; not enough time to attend counselling supervision, CPD training and in-service courses. *"I felt like I was working on a conveyor belt and had very little time to get to know students. I felt under pressure all year and the job was not done the way I would like"* [respondent 167].

5. Guidance counsellors expressed strong emotions of guilt, frustration, disillusionment, annoyance and anger at being unable to provide support and care for all their students. Managing greater care demands with less time resources increased guidance counsellors' own stress levels, which may in turn impact on their capacity to care for students. *"This is the first year that I've found the job so stressful that I wonder how long before this stress affects me physically"* [respondent 93].

Conclusion

The quantitative research findings also show that counselling in schools has decreased more than either career guidance or educational guidance as a result of the changed guidance allocation. On the whole, the evidence suggests that counselling was regarded as expendable by many school principals.

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	Keyfacts
1	Time for counselling in schools in the Free Education System (FES) was reduced, despite a huge demand, while in fee-charging schools, counselling time was not reduced..
2	Many FES schools prioritised student academic achievement and teaching over guidance, with guidance counsellors removed from guidance duties and given an academic teaching timetable.
3	It was impossible for guidance counsellors in FES schools to provide a professional guidance service.
4	Vulnerable students, those needing transition supports, and those with mental health issues experienced compromised care.
5	Managing greater care demands with less time resources increased guidance counsellors' own stress levels, which may in turn impact on their capacity to care for students.
6	The quantitative research findings show that counselling in schools has decreased more than either career guidance or educational guidance.
7	The evidence suggests that counselling was regarded as expendable by many school principals.

Why students leave:
Student non-completion in Higher Education in Ireland

By **Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry**

University College Dublin[1]

Introduction

Student non-completion of higher education is a growing trend internationally with serious consequences for the student in terms of time, expense and emotional energy; the institution in terms of loss of resources and concern for student welfare; and society in terms of opportunity costs and the imperative of ensuring a highly educated workforce for sustainable economic development.

Although Ireland has a relatively high retention rate (78%) compared with many other countries, such as the USA (54%) and Australia (67 %), each year in Ireland 7000 first year students, or 1-in-6 of the annual intake, fail to progress to second year. Over the past ten years there has been increasing policy emphasis on mapping and understanding patterns of student non-completion. Much of this has been quantitative in approach (HEA, 2010 driven by performance metrics, and there is less understanding of the influences on, and the processes underpinning, the decision to withdraw.

> "Very often students underestimate the scale of the transition to third level ... [they may have] an unrealistic assumption about workloads, inaccurate expectations about their course, and lack of understanding of the role of the higher education college vis-à-vis the student."

On October 2014, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning commissioned research with the specific goal of understanding **why** students leave. The aim was to collate and analyse existing qualitative data from HEI's that have been engaged in tracking and evaluating the reasons for non-completion and non-progression. 4,036 student responses were gathered from 16 higher education institutions in Ireland, comprising universities, institutes of technology and HECA colleges, covering the academic years 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14.

The results of the research

A preliminary content analysis of the data generated five key factors related to non-completion. These were Course (n=2042), Personal (n=737), Financial (623), Health and Medical (610), and Family (462). Issues related to "course" dominated, and this is in line with international research; choosing the wrong course has a major impact on student withdrawal and in particular on first year withdrawal. When the results were further disaggregated by type

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1. The full report, co-authored by Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry, Prof Suzanne Quin and Dr Elaine Burroughs is available for download at:
   http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Project-4.pdf
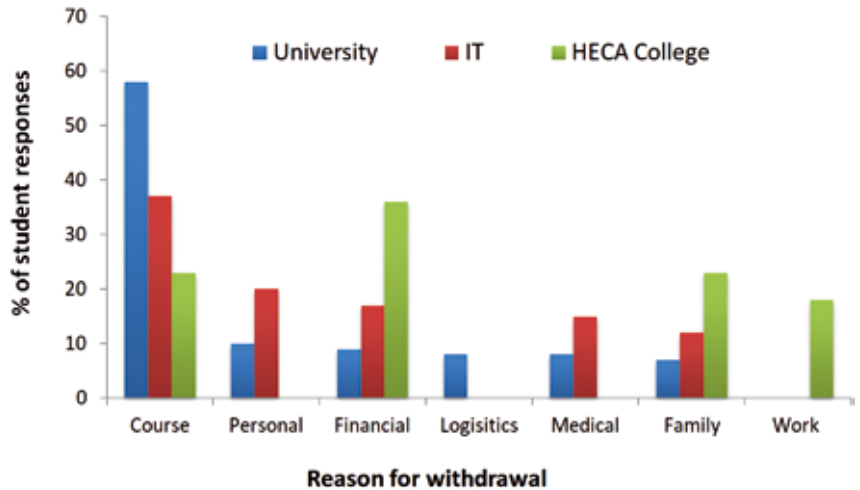
Figure 1: Influences on student withdrawal by institution type (%)

of institution, it was evident that while "course" is generally important, it is of particular concern in the university sector (Figure 1).

Given its dominance, the "course" responses were further disaggregated generating four sub-themes: a) wrong course choice; b) transferring (including reapplying to the CAO); c) course interest and expectation; and d) course difficulty.

Wrong course choice:

The primary reason offered by students for withdrawal was wrong course choice. Although many may have been offered the course they had chosen through the CAO process, the issue was that they made the wrong choice at application stage. The majority of students (those entering higher education following the Leaving Certificate) make their CAO choices during their final terms of secondary school when they are also under pressure with mock and final state examinations. This pressurised context can lead to students making uninformed or rushed decisions.

Many responses suggest that students were not fully informed about their chosen course. Other students felt that the course was an incorrect fit for them as individual learners: "[I] found the college great with excellent facilities; simply the course wasn't for me" (University, 5815). This observation illustrates a sophisticated understanding by students of the need to find a match between their interests and their chosen course and suggests that this needs to be better explored at application stage. Some students did not see a future for themselves in a particular subject area, having entered it with entirely misplaced conceptions about course content and thus their "goal commitment"

"I am finding my economics module very hard and overwhelming. I struggle with maths and did not realise that economics was very maths based" Student

was relatively weak. International studies demonstrate that central to success in higher education is the identification of a clear vision for how their course fits with future careers and a goal for which they can strive.

CAO and transferring:

As we know, course choice is directly linked to the CAO system that determines the course a student takes at higher education on the basis of points achieved in the Leaving Certificate state examination. In our cohort, a small number of students left their course as they made a mistake in completing their CAO form. For a much greater proportion, the course they were offered was not their first option and was often well down their CAO wish list: "[I] didn't really want this course, was my 9th CAO choice"

> "[I] didn't really want this course, was my 9th CAO choice" Student

(IT, 6124). In these cases, students tended to have paid little attention to their interest/suitability for a course placed at the lower levels of their CAO preference list, anticipating they would get into the course of their choice. This may have been due to undue optimism, a poor performance in the Leaving Certificate in comparison to their previous academic performance, or that their selection was made for reasons extraneous to their studies. For others, it was simply Hobson's Choice: "This was the only CAO offer [I got]" (University, 1158).

However, while the above may be conceived as "push" factors, in that students felt they had no choice but to leave college given the wrong decision they had made, a significant finding of this research is that a large number of students who left their course had new, positive plans in place. This included repeating the Leaving Certificate in order to reapply to higher education, transferring to another course or institution, or taking up employment. Students who opted to re-sit their Leaving Certificate indicated that they had given much thought to their situation and had a clear goal in mind. Others had reapplied through the CAO for another course in the same college to begin the following academic year, while some students had got a

> "A significant finding is that a large number of students who left their course had new, positive plans in place. This included repeating the Leaving Certificate, transferring to another course or institution, or taking up employment."

place in the same academic year "recheck of Leaving Cert, got [name of other college]" (IT, 11851). Withdrawal in these cases was a part of the student's career plan, indicating the need for a more nuanced understanding of non-completion.

Course interest and expectation:

Perhaps given the volume of information available to students through, for example, the Qualifax website, one of the most surprising results was the substantial number of students who withdrew from their course because they lacked interest in it: "not as interested [in the course] as I thought I would be" (IT, 674); "I picked a course I had no interest in because I didn't know what I wanted to do and I felt pressure to go to college" (University, 5575).

Students can make ill-informed choices due to the pressure that exists in Ireland to attend higher education following the Leaving Certificate. Other students stated that the course was not what they expected with responses illustrating a lack of real knowledge about the courses they chose and inaccurate expectations of learning in higher education. Perhaps the type of

marketing and competitive recruitment practices, that are commonplace across the sector, contribute to a clear gap between the perceptions and the reality of the work involved at third level. Groups of students who have lower levels of cultural and/or social capital or are first in their family to attend higher education may be particularly vulnerable to misconceptions about particular courses or higher education generally. There is clear evidence that the range of support networks – especially those outside the formal education system – available to students has a significant impact on how they deal with a range of issues in higher education even before they enter higher education.

Course difficulty:

Related to course expectation, a number of students referred to course difficulty as a key influencing factor shaping their decision to withdraw from their programme. Students who were not interested in the course found it difficult: "Didn't like the course, wrong choice. Found it difficult" (University, 177). Indeed, it is likely that if a student chooses a course that does not lack interest them, it will be difficult for them to engage with the course content. This is closely tied up with student self-efficacy, their self-belief and ability to manage challenges, as well as their relationships with those teaching the course. Some students found they lacked the necessary skills to be successful in it: "Found the course difficult without computer skills" (University, 1174); "I am finding my economics module very hard and overwhelming. I struggle with maths and did not realise that economics was very maths based" (University, 5574). These quotations indicate how students can be quite uninformed about the course content and this may be linked to insufficient attention to the details of the course when selecting CAO preferences. Additionally it may be that the entry requirements for some programmes need adjustment to align them better with the real demands of the programmes.

"[I] found the college great with excellent facilities; simply the course wasn't for me" Student

Other issues:

All of these "course" issues are related to other aspects of the higher education experience and for some students, course is just one of a number of interrelated issues that caused them to withdraw. Some students stated that due to loneliness they wanted to do a similar course nearer to home. Other issues affecting student withdrawal included personal issues, commuting times, financial concerns, and health and medical issues. These "life" issues have a significant impact on the student experience, performance and decision-making but, in most cases, they are outside the power of institutions to fully address. However there is an argument that more flexible regulatory and funding structures could ameliorate some of the impact of these factors on a student's decision to withdraw.

"Some students stated that due to loneliness they wanted to do a similar course nearer to home."

What can we learn from the data?

Educational structures, student expectations and course choice decision-making are key to addressing student retention and require a cross-sectoral, multi-pronged strategy. Second level is a demanding time emotionally,

psychologically and academically for students who can feel under general pressure from many sources, themselves included, to apply for higher education courses. For students who subsequently withdrew, insufficient attention, information and advice on what would be best suited to their interests and skills is a factor. How the CAO choice is made is crucial; for many students within our cohort, they made the wrong choice as early as the application stage. Maximum impact on retention requires increased career guidance, information and advice to students applying for higher education to help them to make the best possible choices, including those further down their list of preferences. Such support needs to happen well in advance of the decision-making deadlines, perhaps during Transition Year. Encouraging students to focus on their interests and aptitudes and be realistic about their likely "points" is also key.

For those students who did not get their top preferences, this had a significant impact on their experience. While we do not have the data on the number of students who receive CAO offers lower than their top three preferences, it would be worth tracking these students in particular. There may be an argument

"The primary reason offered by students for withdrawal was wrong course choice."

for opening a very quick CAO change of mind window immediately following publication of the Leaving Cert results so students have an opportunity to amend their choice once they realistically know where, and for what, they are likely to receive an offer.

While there is significant emphasis within the education system generally on academic development, our research illustrates that emotional preparedness ("self-efficacy") is as important and thus resilience is a key attribute that needs to be developed at second level. Very often students under-estimate the scale of the transition to third level and part of that is an unrealistic assumption about workloads, inaccurate expectations about their course, and lack of understanding of the role of the higher education college vis-à-vis the student. To facilitate the student's readiness to enter the higher education sector and to embrace the educational experience on offer, consideration could be given to more transition support/preparation for those entering.

Student support services have a vital role to play in retention but they require enhanced funding to ensure adequacy of provision, availability of staff at appropriate places and times, and the visibility of the service from the student and staff perspective. In order to improve HE retention even further in Ireland, the complex factors underpinning non-completion must be better understood.

Irish Research Council partners with The Wheel

A new partnership between the Irish Research Council and The Wheel was officially launched in March 2015 by the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan TD. Almost €400,000 will be awarded to support collaborative projects between researchers from higher education institutions and community and voluntary organisations with the aim of reflecting and benefiting all elements of society.

Pictured (l-r): **Josephine Boland**, *Senior Lecturer at NUI Galway;* **Martin Naughton**, *co-founder of Aiseanna Tacaíochta Networks;* **Deirdre Garvey**, *Chief Executive Officer of The Wheel;* **Jan O'Sullivan**, *Minister for Education and Skills;* **Eucharia Meehan**, *Director of the Irish Research Council;,* **Clíona Saidlear,** *Strategic & Programme Executive at the Rape Crisis Network.*

Members of the study group pictured here l to r:
Catherine Fox, *Cavan Institute;*
Tomás O'Ruairc, *Teaching Council;*
Lisa Lewis, *Lecturer at MIC; Aidan Kenny, TUI;*
Samu Seitsalo, *Finnish Ministry of Education;*
Gerard Craughwell, *Senator;*
Dr. Fidelma Healy Eames, *Senator and leader of the trip;* **Seán Holian**, *Principal, Clarinbridge NS;*
Aideen O'Mahoney, *Principal, Clohanes NS.*

Study Trip to Finland

In May 2015, the Ministry of Education in Helsinki, Finland, received a group of Irish educators engaged in a study trip around Finland. The purpose of the initiative, led by Dr Fidelma Healy Eames, Senator, was to see first-hand the levels of trust and autonomy experienced by front-line educators in Finland and to explore how this is embedded in Finnish culture and how learners benefit.

Pictured l-r: **Roman Stilling**, *University College Cork;* **Owen Byrne**, *University College Dublin;* **Jessica Hayes**, *National University of Ireland Galway;* **Shalini Singh**, *University of Limerick;* **Thomas Higgins**, *Trinity College Dublin; and* **Mariana Bexiga**, *University College Dublin.*

Six Irish researchers recognised for excellence in research

At a special event in the RDS in June 2015, six Irish researchers were chosen by the Irish Research Council to participate in the prestigious 65th Lindau Nobel Laureate meeting held annually in Lindau, Germany. At this prestigious event, up-and-coming scientists around the world attend masterclasses with 66 Nobel Laureates, each of whom has made ground-breaking scientific discoveries and contributions to our knowledge.

Postgraduate Scholarship Awards

In October 2015, the Minister for Skills Innovation and Research, Damien English TD, announced €16.2 million in funding under the 2015 Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Awards from the Irish Research Council. These Scholarships were established to provide support for the best and brightest Scholars to develop Ireland's research and innovation base.

Annabel Higgins Hoare *(Waterford Institute of Technology) received an Irish Research Council scholarship award for her project which will study the use of seaweed as a wound dressing.*

New chair of Irish Research Council

In September 2015, Professor Jane Ohlmeyer was appointed the new Chair of the Irish Research Council by the Minister for Skills Research and Innovation, Damien English TD. Prof Ohlmeyer is the Erasmus Smith Professor of Modern History at Trinity College Dublin and the Director of the Trinity Long Room Hub. She was the first Vice-President for Global Relations ever appointed in Trinity College.

Afterword

By **Charlie McConalogue**

Opposition Spokesperson on Education in Dáil Éireann

It has been a remarkable privilege for me in recent years, as opposition Education Spokesperson, to have met and learnt from a wide collection of knowledgeable, dedicated and concerned people, including education practitioners, administrators, policy experts and researchers, parents and students, who have valuable insights into the essential and often hidden challenges in Irish Education.

When thinking about ways to address the central challenges we face in our system of education, it is important to begin by acknowledging one undeniable fact – our schools, colleges and universities have a truly remarkable record of delivering for Irish society. Outsiders are often struck by the scale and pace of increased participation and progression in education in Ireland which, in the space of a single generation, has been dramatic and extraordinary.

Remarkable progress made

At second level we have come from a system that was effectively closed to large sections of society to one where we have universal access and a high level of school completion. Early school leaving presently stands at about 11% which compares favourably to the EU-27 and EU-15 averages of 14% and 16% respectively.

At third level, we have moved from a small exclusive sector to one of the most participatory in the world. In the space of 30 years, we have come from one of the lowest rates of third level graduation in the OECD to almost the highest attainment rates of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral degrees among young people.

Nevertheless, we face many challenging issues within our education system. While

reforms since Donagh O'Malley's time have been expansive, there are still many communities that are not reaping the full benefits of education. And there are too many children with disabilities and special needs who are not getting the necessary support or resources to fully engage in their education.

It is even truer today than in the past that educational attainment has a broad-ranging, enduring and irreplaceable impact on a young person's life. More and more, education has become a life-long necessity and increasingly defines a young person's life chances.

Education systems can exacerbate social problems

As a society we have to remain cognisant that our education system can act as a barrier as well as a spur to social mobility. The education system can be a site for addressing and alleviating the causes of social exclusion, promoting good citizenship, enriching culture, and underpinning economic development. Or it can be a locus for exacerbating social problems.

Key priority: actively including all

This is why I believe that reducing school failure and improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils has to be a key priority in the education policy agenda. Now more than ever, we need thoughtful, creative education solutions to deal with what is perhaps Ireland's most acute economic and societal problem – the huge number of young people who are 'NEETs' (not in employment, education or training). At present, we have one of the highest levels of young people aged 15-29 in the EU in this situation, at 18.1%.

Perhaps the greatest challenge we face as a society will be to ensure that a wider section of our communities will more fully reap the benefits of our education system. We still have a distance to travel to remove barriers to attainment in higher and further education across the board. The shocking statistics released by the HEA last year – that only 15% of young people from Dublin 17 and Dublin 10 progressed to third level, compared to 99% in Dublin 6 – were a stark revelation of the disparity that exists.

Policy interventions needed

Such education inequality is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon which requires rounded solutions involving both the higher and further education sectors. However, more especially, it has to involve earlier policy interventions at secondary, primary and early education levels.

The 1996 policy change of removing third level tuition fees has not, on its own, been sufficient in narrowing the social class differential in higher education. Even when students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' access third level, there is strong evidence than they are not succeeding in large enough numbers but have continually high non-progression rates, especially in Level 6 and 7 programmes.

Investment

Investment at all levels of education is required to fundamentally impact education disadvantage. At primary level, this can be done by easing pressure on massively over-burdened classrooms, revitalising small rural and urban schools, restoring school leadership, fixing school infrastructure, and by reducing and eventually eliminating the need for parents and guardians of pupils to pay voluntary contributions to keep the school gates open. Increasing the provision of SNAs and Resource Teaching Hours to all schools, while reforming the inequitable system of assessment and allocation, is urgently required.

At second level, career guidance has deteriorated severely in recent years due to the removal of the ex-quota guidance provision, resulting in a 51% reduction in one-on-one counselling supports. Young people who lack a family history of high education achievement are at particular risk of making poor choices that they regret later, and from which it is difficult to escape. The loss of guidance services, especially in working class schools where parental contributions and school fees are not available to replace the lost counsellors, has caused a disjointed and inequitable access to guidance at second level and colleges of further education. I strongly believe that we need to restore the ex-quota provision of guidance counsellors to schools as a matter of priority.

DEIS and School Completion Programmes

Recent ESRI reports confirm that DEIS and School Completion Programmes have been extremely effective in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged and more privileged students. However, while the DEIS programme has been a vital policy tool for combating education disadvantage, the programme is becoming increasingly less relevant, as new schools have not been given the opportunity to apply for the scheme in recent years. Similarly, the School Completion Programme, first introduced by the Fianna Fáil Government in 2002, has been identified as a model of best practice by the EU and the OECD as a targeted programme that increases retention rates in schools. But, locating the administration of the programme in the Department of Children has been a mistake. Community services have experienced 5% year-on-year reductions in resources since 2012, which has meant that many interventions, such as summer programmes, are now not available for children in disadvantaged circumstances. Any reasonable education policy must commit more resources to both DEIS and the School Completion Programmes.

FET's image

Finally, the Further Education & Training (FET) sector has not been given the attention it deserves or requires to provide high quality, career focused training. In Ireland, there is a suspicion that FET learners are of lesser ability, which is a prejudice that the next Minister for Education needs to overcome as a priority.

Conferences in 2016

MiTE 2016 - 2nd International Conference on Mobile Technology in Teacher Education
VENUE: Ardilaun Hotel, Galway
DATE: 22 - 23 January 2016
KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Professor Stephen Heppell
CONTACT: Séan Ó Grádaigh,
School of Education, NUI Galway, sean.ogradaigh@nuigalway.ie
WEBSITE: www.gratek.ie/mite2016/

Irish Primary Principals (IPPN) Annual Conference
VENUE: Citywest Hotel, Dublin
DATE: 28 - 29 January 2016
KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Dr. Todd Whitaker,
Bayh College of Education, Indiana State University
WEBSITE: www.ippn.ie

CPSMA Annual Conference
VENUE: Radisson Hotel, Dublin Airport
DATE: 26 - 27 February 2016
WEBSITE: www.cpsma.ie

Institute of Guidance Councellors Annual Conference
VENUE: University of Limerick
DATE: 26 - 27 February 2016
WEBSITE: www.igc.ie

ACCS Annual Conference
VENUE: Slieve Russell Hotel, Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan
DATE: 3 - 5 March 2016

USI Annual Congress
VENUE: West County Hotel, Ennis
DATE: 21-24 March 2016
WEBSITE: www.usi.ie

INTO Annual Congress
VENUE: Whites Hotel, Abbey Street, Wexford
DATE: 28 - 30 March 2016
WEBSITE: www.into.ie

ASTI Annual Conference
VENUE: Killarney Convention Centre, Muckross Road, Killarney
DATE: 29 - 31 March 2016
WEBSITE: www.asti.ie

TUI Annual Conference
VENUE: INEC, Muckross Road, Killarney
DATE: 29 - 31 March 2016
WEBSITE: www.tui.ie

Ireland International Conference on Education (IICE)
VENUE: Clayton Hotel, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
DATE: 25-28 April 2016
SUBMISSION DATE FOR ABSTRACTS: 10 January 2016
CONTACT: info@iicedu.org
WEBSITE: www.iicedu.org

JMB/AMCSS Annual Conference
VENUE: Europa Hotel, Killarney, Co Kerry
DATE: 27 - 29 April 2016
WEBSITE: www.jmb.ie

IFUT Annual Conference
VENUE: Gresham Hotel, Dublin
DATE: 7 May 2016
WEBSITE: www.ifut.ie

IMPACT Conference
VENUE: Gleneagle Hotel, Killarney, Co Kerry
DATE: 14 – 15 May 2016
CONTACT: Roisin Nolan: rnolan@impact.ie
WEBSITE: www.impact.ie

Bullied, Bullies and Bystanders: Advancing Knowledge, Understanding and Practice in Education
HOSTED BY: National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre
VENUE: Dublin City University (DCU)
DATE: 9 – 10 June 2016
WEBSITE: www.bully.ie

26th EECERA conference
CHAIR: Dr Colette Gray
THEME: Happiness, Relationships, Emotion and Deep Level Learning
VENUE: Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
DATES: 31 August 31 – 3 September 2016
WEBSITE: www.eecera2016.org

Education & Training Boards (ETBI) Conference
VENUE: Gleneagle Hotel and Brehon Hotel, Killarney,
DATE: 21 – 22 September 2016
CONTACT: Avril White, support@etbi.ie
WEBSITE: www.etbi.ie

NAPD Conference
VENUE: Kerry (to be confirmed)
DATE: 20 - 21 October 2016 (to be confirmed)
WEBSITE: www.napd.ie

Index