

Education in Ireland: Past Successes and Future Problems

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Introduction

Ireland's education system has come a long way from its inception in 1831. It started as a vision by Lord Stanley in which students of all sects were integrated into one national school system. As time passed, there were numerous struggles between groups of people regarding the education system: the Roman Catholic Church fought the Church of Ireland, the government fought the churches, and the parents and teachers fought the government. The result of the conflict is an education system that produces highly intelligent students that are ready to work in today's industries.

In the discussion that follows, I present a brief history of Ireland's education system and the various events that took place to form the present-day system. I then describe in detail the structure of primary, secondary, and higher education. My principal emphasis is on secondary education because it is the area of greatest controversy due to the Leaving Certificate Examination that most students take before enrolling in higher education (i.e., colleges and universities). Finally, I explain the relationship between Ireland's current technical know-how and its education system.

History of Ireland's Education System

Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries – Influence of Church and State

Ireland's modern educational system can trace its roots back to 1831. At that time, Lord Stanley first introduced the national education system. Stanley's idealistic vision was to promote harmony through multid denominational education. A national board was established, whose duty was to collect the necessary money to build schools, set up a system of school inspection, pay teacher salaries, and establish training facilities for teachers. (Ó Buachalla, p. 20) Schools were intended to be multid denominational. However, the Anglican, Catholic, and Presbyterian churches each fought to mold the national school system as they saw fit so as to make the school system "undenominational in theory but denominational in practice." (Ó Buachalla, p. 22) Stanley's vision was, for practical purposes, abandoned after the Powis Commission of Inquiry of 1870, which effectively segregated the national schools into denominational institutions.

The national school system had its share of problems. One problem at the end of the nineteenth century was poor student attendance since there was no law that mandated that students must attend school. In addition, students needed to pay fees for their schooling. These circumstances brought about the Irish Education Act of 1892. This act intended to make education free and mandatory for students between the ages of six and fourteen. It also adjusted teachers' income to make up for the loss of student fees. (Ó Buachalla, p. 26) This act was the first that attempted to establish a free education system. It was moderately successful in that the British Treasury allocated the necessary funds to make education free. However, the Treasury did this by taking money from teachers; therefore, it was not very popular.

Another important development at the end of the nineteenth century was the increased influence of the Roman Catholic Church. At the beginning of the century, the Roman Catholic Church had relatively little power and influence compared to the Church of Ireland. The Roman Catholic Church envied the Church of Ireland because the Church of Ireland was a major influence in cultural, political, and education affairs. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the positions of power for both churches had been reversed. (Ó Buachalla, p. 36) The Roman Catholic Church had successfully used the education system to extend its sphere of influence relative to the Church of Ireland by winning a series of education battles against the government, as discussed below. (Akenson, p. 390)

Roman Catholic Church leaders used the power of the teaching orders in order to combat the influence of the Church of Ireland. At first, these leaders promoted multidenominational national education and were at the forefront in deciding policy; Archbishop Murray of Dublin was one of the first Commissioners of National Education. However, when Cardinal Paul Cullen succeeded Murray in 1849, the Roman Catholic Church changed its position on the national education system. According to critics, Cullen treated Ireland as “a good Catholic machine fashioned mainly to spread the faith over the world.” (O’ Leary, p. 36) By the end of his career, Cullen succeeded not only in converting the national schools to Catholic schools, but also in setting up a Catholic majority on the national board that would determine education policy. At this point, the Roman Catholic Church was now effectively in charge of the Irish education system.

The Present – Teachers Gain Power

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the churches and the government were the only bodies that could make education policy. The boards were made up of people whom the church and state had nominated, and policy decisions were administered by these people. Some groups, such as the political parties and teachers unions, were not satisfied with their lack of power in influencing policy. The teachers struggled with the boards for decades, but they could not affect much change since the managerial bodies had a direct connection with the decision-making institutions, namely the church and state.

Today the church and state do not have nearly as much power with regard to education as they did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Education Act of 1998 has given more power to teachers to decide Ireland's school curriculum. ("The Education Act: 1998") For example, the Curriculum Committee for Social, Environmental, and Scientific Education that effectively sets the science curriculum contains members from various groups: thirteen members are in teachers' organizations, six are in religious organizations, four are in government organizations, and three are in parents' organizations. (SESE Curriculum Committee, p. 121) Thus, teachers now make up 50 percent of the curriculum committee, giving them much more power than in the past to decide what students should learn in Ireland's schools. The Roman Catholic Church, however, still has influence over school policy since it provides much of the funding to primary and secondary schools.

With the ascension of the Fianna Fáil party prior to the 1950s, new life was brought into the Irish education system. Strong, energetic, young leaders sought to take

advantage of the economic success of Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s in order to enact a new wave of education reform. In 1966 Donagh O'Malley's free education scheme made a huge impact on Irish education by making secondary education free for all Irish students. (Ó Buachalla, p. 74) Student enrollment increased dramatically not only in first-level and second-level schools but also in third-level schools. With an increased demand for higher education, policymakers added institutes of technology to the existing third-level colleges and universities. In the 1980s, these technical schools received a large amount of funding from the government. This new focus on technology in education served to lead Ireland to a major economic boom that it has experienced over the past decade.

Structure of Ireland's Education System

Primary Education

Today Ireland's schools are separated into three main levels – first level, second level, and third level. Primary education can begin as early as age three. Roughly 65 percent of Ireland's youth are in pre-school by age four, and almost all are in pre-school by age five. ("Brief Description ...") Primary schools in Ireland are analogous to elementary schools in the United States. They are intended to give students a firm educational foundation that will prepare them for more advanced study during their secondary education. Students end their primary education at about the age of twelve.

Secondary Education

Secondary education is divided into two parts – a junior cycle and a senior cycle. The junior cycle in Ireland is similar to the middle school or junior high school period in

the United States. It is a three-year cycle that prepares students for the senior cycle. The senior cycle is a two- or three-year cycle, similar to high school in the United States, that is arguably the most important part of an Irish student's education. This cycle is also sometimes called the Leaving Certificate Programme because at the end of the senior cycle, most students take the Leaving Certificate Examination (Leaving Cert), an annual examination that tests the skills of students in a variety of subjects. Ireland uses a points system for student assessment; a specific number of points are allocated to a student based on the subjects in which the student was tested and on how well he or she performed in each subject. Universities and technical colleges use these points not only for admission purposes, but also to decide what courses a student can and cannot take. For example, only students with very high scores on the Leaving Cert are allowed to study medicine or law.

Students need not enter the senior cycle immediately after the junior cycle. They now have the option of entering the Transition Year Programme, a program intended to relieve some of the stress on Ireland's education system by giving students more freedom to study the subjects they want. Moreover, the courses are specifically tailored for each student.

Students are not required to take the established Leaving Certificate Programme after their junior cycle. Instead, they can enroll in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme during their senior cycle, which is similar to the established Leaving Certificate Programme. However, students enrolled in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme focus on more technical subjects than those in the established Leaving Certificate Programme. Students also have the option to take the Leaving Certificate

Applied Programme instead of the established Leaving Certificate Programme.

According to the Department of Education, this program is “a person-centered programme involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based structure.”

(Commission on the Points System, p. 41) The problem with this program is that enrolled students are not guaranteed entry into third-level schools.

Higher Education

Approximately half of all Irish students go into third-level schools (or colleges) by the age of 18. There are four main types of colleges in Ireland: universities, technical colleges, teacher training colleges, and privately-owned colleges. There are seven universities in Ireland: University College Cork; University College Dublin; National University of Ireland, Galway; National University of Ireland, Maynooth; Trinity College, Dublin; University of Limerick; and Dublin City University. Approximately 59 percent of third-level students are enrolled in one of these seven universities. There are also eleven technical colleges, in addition to the Dublin Institute of Technology, the hub of Ireland’s technical colleges. Roughly 39 percent of third-level students are enrolled in these colleges. The remaining two percent of third-level students are either enrolled in one of the five colleges of education for primary teachers or in one of the privately owned third-level schools.

The Leaving Cert

Overview and Importance of the Leaving Cert

In 1924 the Leaving Certificate Examination was introduced into Ireland’s educational system. Its importance has significantly increased over the years. It is now

the deciding factor in determining in which third-level institution a student may enroll and what courses he or she can take. Also this exam can only be taken once a year during the month of June. Therefore, if a student does not do well due to sickness or personal reasons, he or she cannot simply retake the test. As a result, students face tremendous pressure to succeed on this examination.

Students choose to be tested in specific subjects on the exam. The Rules and Programme for Secondary schools recommends that students be tested in seven subjects (which 78 percent of students are), but some students are tested on more than nine subjects. (*Rules and Programme ...*, p. 17) Students can choose from a variety of subjects, such as Latin, computer studies, physics, engineering, and agricultural studies. Students are then evaluated on each section, and universities and technical institutions admit them solely on their composite scores.

These scores need to be interpreted for those third-level schools that use the points system as a way to assess prospective students. Therefore, in 1977 a group of universities formed a system called the Central Applications Office (CAO) to process applications and admissions universally for Ireland's universities and colleges. The system works this way. Applicants use a single application form to apply for up to 20 fields of study (listed in order of preference) at the universities in the CAO system. Each university receives the same points total from the Leaving Cert. However, the institutions solely determine the method of selection. They are in full control of admissions policies (e.g., courses offered, number of students accepted for each field of study), and they use the CAO in order to complete the selection process. The number of students accepted in specific fields of study is inversely proportional to the demand for

that field and directly proportional to the amount of resources allocated to that specific field. For example, not many students are accepted into medicine because the demand is so high. However, the number of technology positions has increased in the past decade due to the importance that Ireland has placed on having more graduates with a technical background.

The points scheme is shown in Table 1. Students are given a set number of points based on the grade that they received in a particular subject. Students who take a more difficult examination (“higher paper”) will receive more points than students who opt to take a less challenging one (“ordinary paper”). The top six scores from each subject are added together to give the total score. Students are then ranked based on these scores, and students with higher scores receive first preference for course of study at third-level institutions. If a course gets filled, then students remaining on the list are not able to take that course.

Table 1
1997 Points Scheme

Leaving Cert Grade	Higher Paper	Ordinary Paper	Bonus Higher Maths*
A1	100	60	40
A2	90	50	35
B1	85	45	30
B2	80	40	25
B3	75	35	20
C1	70	30	15
C2	65	25	10
C3	60	20	5
D1	55	15	--
D2	50	10	--
D3	45	5	--

*The bonus mark is only awarded by the University of Limerick and the Dublin Institute of Technology for certain mathematics and science courses

Source: Commission on the Points System, p. 17

Problems with the Points System

Many are now questioning whether the points system is truly the best way to evaluate a student's performance through second-level education. Both students and parents complain that there is simply too much pressure to succeed since a single exam can shape the course of a student's life. Teachers argue that the scope of the courses that they teach is narrowed, due to the fact that students are not motivated to learn material that is not directly relevant to questions that would be posed on the Leaving Cert.

Ireland's former prime minister Albert Reynolds has cited another problem inherent in the points system. (Reynolds) Reynolds poses the following example. Suppose that a student whose primary interest is engineering achieves a high score on all parts of the exam. With such a high score, the student will be pressured to study medicine or law because only students with exceptional scores are able to study these subjects. Acquiescing to the pressures of society, suppose the student then takes up the study of law. A few years later he realizes that he simply does not enjoy law and consequently drops out of the school. Thus, Reynolds' contention is that the Leaving Cert guides students to paths that they do not necessarily want to travel. He explained that this is a significant problem and that there have been discussions on the matter in political circles, but with no consensus to date.

In 1997 the government decided to examine the points system thoroughly as part of its Action Programme for the Millennium and created an independent study group called the Commission on the Points System for this purpose. The Commission would

not only recommend initiatives and reform to the present system but would also detail a strategy as to how to implement these recommendations.

The Commission questioned students, parents, faculty and staff at second- and third-level institutions, businesspeople, and professional organizations on whether or not the points system should be changed. Interestingly, the general consensus was that no changes needed to be made. Quoting the Commission's findings:

A large number of submissions indicate broad support for and acceptance of the existing system of entry to third-level education and suggest that little or no direct change is necessary to the points system itself. They consider that the existing system, particularly insofar as it pertains to school leavers, is transparent, impartial and efficient. They also point to its public acceptability and objectivity and would be concerned that any changes might undermine these characteristics. Nonetheless, it is argued in some submissions that, by treating all students equally, the points system is actually reinforcing existing inequalities and contributing to inequalities of outcome. (Commission on the Points System, p. 104)

There is some debate on this last point about social inequality. Some claim that poorer students do not perform as well on the Leaving Certificate Examination as their more affluent colleagues because the schools that they attend are not as good. The students with more money attend the better schools, giving them a distinct advantage over poorer students. (Houlihan) Others claim that the points system is not to blame for social inequality, but rather it is the high cost of third-level education that is the cause.

Recent Reforms

Although it does not seem likely that there will be any radical changes to the points system in the near future, there have been some recent changes that address some of the problems mentioned earlier. For example, students now have the option of

enrolling in the Transition Year Programme before enrolling in the Leaving Certificate Programme. During the Transition Year, students have a great amount of flexibility as to what they choose to study and to do with their free time. It is designed to “give students space and time to mature free from the pressure of public examinations.” (Commission on the Points System, p. 38) Approximately half of all students now enroll in the Transition Year Programme, and it is projected that about three-quarters of students will take the Transition Year option within the next ten years.

Students also have the option of taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme instead of the established Leaving Certificate Programme. This program is focused more on subjects that will enhance specific skills required for the workplace. According to the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland, the problem with enrolling in this program instead of the established Leaving Certificate Programme is that students do not earn any points in this program. Therefore, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme students who desire to go on to higher education are at a disadvantage relative to Leaving Certificate Programme students. (Commission on the Points System, p. 118)

There have been suggestions that Ireland’s third-level institutions consider more than simply Leaving Certificate Examination scores when assessing the quality of an applicant. Some have recommended that schools also consider interviews, grades, and references, as is done in the United States. However, until there is a substantial push for such reform, it is likely that the points system will remain as it is currently structured.

The Greater Emphasis on Technology

Ireland's Technically Educated Workforce

Technology is currently a major factor behind Ireland's booming economy.

When high-tech companies such as Pfizer and Lucent Technologies moved to Ireland, they did so partly because many Irish people have a good technical background. As can be discerned from the previous discussion, third-level institutions are highly selective, and only the best students are able to reach this level.

In fact, Ireland has one of the best technically trained workforces in the world. ("Educated, Employed ... Irish") About 70 percent of Ireland's third-level students study engineering, science, computer science, or business. And the fact that hundreds of foreign-owned technology companies have set up plants in Ireland shows that the world is confident in Ireland's technical workforce.

But how did Ireland achieve this level of superiority in the technology industry? The general consensus is that it is due to the competitive nature of the Irish when it comes to educating students. As described earlier, students with high scores on the Leaving Cert have first choice as to what college or university they wish to attend and what course of study they wish to pursue. Therefore, only the strongest students (those who did well on the Leaving Cert) are able to go on to third-level education. "There's a lot of respect for education because it is so hard to get," says Eoin O'Neill, the director of Innovation Services at Trinity College. ("Educated, Employed ... Irish")

Another reason cited for the technical sophistication of Ireland's workforce is the fact that third-level students take only courses within their major of study. There is no focus on liberal arts courses such as philosophy or history because knowledge of these subjects does not add to the technical knowledge of the student. From Ireland's point of

view, students use their time more efficiently by only studying those subjects that will make them better workers in technical industries.

Disenchantment with Studying Technology

While there has been a large base of well-educated students in Ireland for high-tech companies, there is now concern that the number of students taking up technological study may be falling. According to Tony Quinlan, Registrar of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology:

The industrial side was emphatic regarding its concern ... that there were throughput problems on courses producing technicians. It was agreed as a response that a task force would be established ... which would increase the supply of appropriately qualified technicians and which furthermore, would be representative of industry and colleges. (Commission on the Points System, pp. 24-25)

In 1997 a special National Technician course was established in the technical colleges. This course is focused towards people who had not previously considered studying technology. In addition, current employees and mature students (students over the age of 21) are encouraged to take the course. Ireland is simply trying to tap all its resources in order to provide technical training to as many people as possible because the government knows that its economy depends on having a technically educated workforce.

Unfortunately, it does not seem that these efforts have worked, as the last few years have seen a continuous decline in the number of students pursuing a technical career. Paddy Healy, a lecturer in acoustics at the Dublin Institute for Technology, said, "In a situation where modern society requires more and more technology, the very opposite is happening in our schools." ("Educators Add New Fizz to Physics")

Inadequate compensation is one cause for students' disenchantment with studying technology. Medicine and law attract the most students primarily because of the high salaries of doctors and lawyers. And if a student does decide to major in a technical field, there is no guarantee that he or she will work in Ireland because wage offers are generally higher in other countries. An Irish student with a technical degree can earn a six-figure salary in the United States or in the United Kingdom, whereas he or she will only earn approximately \$20,000 in Ireland ("Educated, Employed ... Irish").

The problem of students' waning interest in technology is not limited to Ireland. In all of Europe people are concerned that students are losing interest in science and technology. Academics give several reasons for this phenomenon. Some say that there is not enough money put into technical research. European countries spend approximately 1.8 percent of GDP on research, whereas the U.S. and Japan spend approximately 2.7 percent and 3.1 percent, respectively. ("Educators Add New Fizz to Physics") Others say that the problem is due to the way that science is taught to students. Jiri Dolejsi, a lecturer at Charles University in Prague, says that in order to interest students in science, students need to "get some experience and not to stay only with formulae and mathematics." ("Educators Add New Fizz to Physics") This concern of teachers can also be seen in the United States where retired Senator-astronaut John Glenn proposed a tenfold increase in spending for training teachers in science and mathematics. Thus, Ireland is not alone in its efforts to encourage more young people to get involved in the field of technology.

In order to address the concerns mentioned above, Ireland's Department of Education has launched a program called Schools IT 2000. According to the department, the objective of Schools IT 2000 is the following:

To put in place a permanent infrastructure which will ensure that pupils in every school have the opportunity to achieve computer literacy and to equip themselves for participation in the information society; and support is given to teachers to develop and renew professional skills, which will enable them to utilise ICTs [information and communication technologies] as part of the learning environment of the school. ("Schools IT 2000")

By the end of the year 2001, Ireland will spend approximately £40 million on this program. Specific goals of the program include the following:

- At least 60,000 computers will be placed in Ireland's schools.
- All Irish schools will have access to the Internet.
- At least 20,000 teachers will receive technical training.
- Technology will be increasingly integrated with the curriculum of all subjects.

Hence, Ireland is certainly not content with its current standing as a highly technically educated society. Still, it remains to be seen whether Schools IT 2000 will be able to rekindle students' interest in science and technology.

Conclusions

Ireland's education system has managed to produce excellent students. However, there are some problems that Ireland is currently trying to solve.

There is some concern that students taking the Leaving Certificate Examination are under extreme stress. The new programs that have been adopted to address these concerns, such as the Transition Year Programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational

Programme, should help to alleviate the pressure once more students become involved in these programs. Although it is difficult to change a system that has been in place for many years, these programs show that Ireland is willing to make some modifications if they will improve the education system.

The highly technically trained workforce in Ireland is largely due to Ireland's excellent education system. Ireland is not content with its current standing in the world, however. It realizes that in order to stay competitive, school administrators must continue to improve its education through programs like Schools IT 2000. It remains to be seen whether Ireland will continue to succeed in an increasingly technical world.

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Abstract

One of the main reasons why Ireland has a thriving economy is because its workforce is highly educated. This article examines the Irish education system, describing how Ireland has prepared its students and how it plans to continue to do so in an increasingly technical world.

Biography

Michael Carone graduated with highest honors from Lehigh University in June 2001 with a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering and a minor in economics. While at Lehigh, he was inducted into the Tau Beta Pi honors society. He served as a writer for the *Brown and White* and was also a member of the Choral Union and the S.T.A.R. Academy. He is currently pursuing his Masters degree in mechanical engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology.