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The Irish and Mexican Education Systems – some comparative perspectives.

Paper prepared by Professor Áine Hyland, University College, Cork, for a Joint Irish / Mexico Conference on Education to be held in Mexico City on 5th / 6th October 2000.

Introduction

I am pleased and honoured to be invited to speak at this historic conference, where delegates from Ireland and Mexico meet for the first time under the terms of the Education Agreement signed by both countries in 1998. It is timely that this conference should be held as we face into the new millenium – a millenium which holds enormous potential for the human race. To quote from a recent book *Schooling for Change*[1]*:*

> Our future is very much an open book. It can be one of triumphant innovation; of diverse and self-fulfilling yet environmentally sustainable lifestyles; of people living and working together in communities of difference. Or it can be a future of division and despair where the successful are seduced into a technologically glitzy world of superficial consumerism and lifestyle choices, while the unsuccessful are condemned to unemployment, underemployment or undemanding employment that offers them few real choices. The nature of our future depends, in part, on how we prepare the next generation who will live and make it.

This is my third visit to Mexico in recent years. On the previous two occasions (1998 and 1999) I attended International Congresses in the State of Guanajuato, organised by the then Governor of Guanajuato, Vicente Fox, shortly to become President of Mexico. Governor Fox recognised the important contribution which education can make to the cultural and economic development of a state or a country. In that context, he inaugurated a series of International Congresses at which invited speakers from a number of OECD and non-OECD countries discussed the educational challenges facing Mexico and specifically the State of Guanajuato in the twenty first century. At those congresses, I had the opportunity to meet with policy-makers, administrators and teachers from different cities and towns in the state of Guanajuato and to discuss with them the educational issues which were of mutual concern and interest. I found that Mexico and Ireland have many similarities and share many parallel challenges. Some of the educational challenges which currently face the Mexican education system are challenges which we faced in Ireland – and in some instances resolved - within recent decades. Others are issues which are currently high on our educational agenda in Ireland. Among these issues are the following:

[1] A. Hargreaves, L. Earl and J. Ryan *Schooling for Change* London: Falmer Press, 1996.

- The development of a system of education which will meet the ongoing needs of the people and of the economy – a system which is sensitive to the culture, traditions and history of our respective countries but which is also forward-looking, responsive to change and builds on technological advances

- Ongoing reform and revision of curriculum and assessment, taking into account the findings of international research on teaching, learning and assessment

- Provision of appropriate and relevant education for pupils with special educational needs

- Ensuring quality of educational provision at all levels

- Reviewing and developing teacher education – both pre-service and in-service;

- Improvement of the educational infrastructure;

- Ensuring access and retention of traditionally under-represented groups at both second and tertiary levels and addressing issues of social exclusion

- Development of education and training courses (especially in the technological areas) to meet the skills needs of industry (including the services industry)

- Exploiting educational technology in teaching and learning

- Developing flexible routes of progression into and through the education system – including appropriate modes and techniques of assessment and certification.

Before I look specifically at the educational systems in both our countries, it might be useful to set down the background within which the education system in Ireland operates. I will look first at the broad economic and social context before describing the salient features of the Irish education system and touching on some of the similarities and differences between Ireland and Mexico.

Background - The National and Economic Context.

Geographical

Ireland is an island on the western periphery of Europe. Since 1921, the island has been divided politically into two parts. Ireland (or Éire in the Irish language) comprises about 80% of the island covering over 70,000 kilometres in all. It is administratively divided into 26 counties, and its capital city is Dublin. The east of the country is more densely populated than the west and a third of the inhabitants live in and around Dublin. Northern Ireland, which consists of six counties, is part of the United Kingdom (Great Britain) and its capital city is Belfast. This report refers to Ireland (Éire). Ireland has two official languages – English and Irish (Gaelic) – and while about 20% of the population have some fluency in Irish, English is the commonly used language of the people.

Demographic
The population of the country is about 3,700,000, almost 50% of whom are under 25 years of age. Traditionally, Ireland has had a high birth rate and a high rate of outward migration. Both the birth rate and the rate of migration have fallen significantly in the 1990s. In the early 1980s, 75,000 children were born every year on average. By the mid to late 1990s, this had fallen to less than 50,000 p.a. but the birth rate has begun to rise again in the past three years. The level of net emigration (to the U.K., U.S., and Australia and to a lesser extent to mainline European countries) peaked at almost 50,000 in the late 1980s, but fell dramatically during the 1990s. For the past few years, Ireland has experienced net immigration – estimated at around 10,000 p.a. Some of these are returned emigrants; others have come to Ireland to take up employment in the growing industrial and services sector. A recent phenomenon has been the arrival of refugees seeking political asylum and some undocumented foreigners from outside the European Union.

Industrial
Ireland was originally an agricultural country with a large proportion of its population involved in farming. The pattern has changed dramatically in recent decades and the number engaged in agriculture has continued to fall throughout the nineties. In the past decade, there has been a substantial growth in employment, particularly in the technology area, in tourism and in the services sector. Since Ireland became a member of the European Community in 1973, the country has broadened its industrial and commercial base, from a strong dependence on agriculture and traditional industries to modern export-oriented industries in food processing, electronics, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, machinery, information and communications technology (particularly software) and services[2]. In the 1990s, as part of its industrial policy, Ireland attracted a large number of multi-national projects in sectors such as Electronics, Computers and Chemicals. The availability of staff with the necessary skills and competitiveness wages rates was a key factor in the success of this policy.

Economic
The Irish economy has experienced a period of rapid growth in recent years. The Government's budget deficit has been eliminated, interest rates and inflation are low, and exports have maintained a steady growth. As a member of the European Monetary Union (EMU), Ireland is one of the European countries which has adopted a common currency (the euro) since the beginning of 1999.

Ireland's economic growth in recent years has exceeded the targets set by government in the early 1990s by a wide margin[3]. Since 1994, GNP growth has averaged 7.5% per annum in real terms and is projected to reach almost 10% in the current year. One of the most encouraging aspects of Ireland's economic performance in recent years was the extent to which this growth was extremely employment intensive. The numbers at work

[2] D. Stokes and E. Watters, *Ireland: Vocational Education and Training – A Guide*. Leonardo da Vinci, 1997.
[3] Ireland *National Development Plan 2000-2006.* Dublin, Government Publications, 2000.

in the five year period between 1994 and 1999 grew by over 370,000. While the labour force grew strongly, the unemployment rate fell from over 15% in 1993 to about 6% in early 1999 – one of the lowest rates in the EU. It is currently estimated at around than 5%. (During the 1980s, unemployment levels had reached over 250,000 at one stage). Long-term unemployment has also fallen dramatically.

Income per head in Ireland grew during the 1990s so that by 1998, Ireland's GDP per capita had reached parity with the EU average. All components of GNP contributed to this strong output growth. Private consumption grew rapidly, lower interest rates supported consumer confidence and supported an expansion in investment. Investment in machinery and equipment grew rapidly reflecting the strong expansion in manufacturing industry, much of which was in high technology industries. This resulted in turn in strong demand for commercial construction, which allied to a high demand for housing resulted in overall growth in building and construction investment of over 14% per annum.

These and other factors contributed to the strong performance of the economy since the early 1990s. The most important factor was the stable macro-economic background of low inflation, moderate wage developments and prudent budgetary policies. The Social Partnership model has been an integral part of this framework and the four national agreements between 1994 and 1999 helped to restore Ireland's cost competitiveness. This generated confidence in economic policy and boosted business activity and productivity, resulting in high levels of investment and job creation. This in turn, delivered a turnaround in the public finances facilitating tax reform and increased expenditure on public services.

Demographic factors also contributed to Ireland's economic growth in the 1990s. Ireland's high birth rate in the 1970s led to a large increase in the working-age population in the 1990s. Combined with falls in unemployment, this led to a large fall in Ireland's dependency rates. Relatively high levels of public investment in physical and human capital, undertaken with the help of European Structural and Cohesion funding, improved the stock of public infrastructure. And very significantly, in the context of this paper, increased investment in education over a period of decades, improved the average educational levels of the workforce. Improvements in the quality of education are also recognised as being a key factor behind growth in national productivity.

The rate of investment in education and training has been identified as one of the primary contributors to Ireland's economic development. The National Development Plan recognises that there is a clear consensus that investment in education and training has a very high rate of return and that it accounts for a significant proportion of the observed variation in economic growth rates around the world. A survey of the largest multinational companies operating in Ireland in 1998 listed 'labour force flexibility', 'the educational system', and 'labour force availability' as being among the five most important determinants of competitiveness.

National Development Plan 2000-2006

The government has recently issued a National Development Plan which sets out the government's priorities for the period 2000 to 2006. The central challenge which is addressed in the Plan is the implementation of public policies which will increase the capacity of Ireland's economy to maintain strong and sustainable output and employment growth. The economy must be prepared for the competitive challenges arising from new and rapidly changing domestic and international economic conditions. It is important that Ireland's recent economic progress is consolidated and built on in a sustainable way. The following are the objectives which underpin the strategy for the National Development Plan:

- Continuing sustainable national economic and employment growth;
- Consolidating and improving Ireland's international competitiveness;
- Fostering balanced regional development;
- Promoting Social Inclusion.

The key elements of the strategy to meet these objectives are:

- Continuation of the stability orientated macroeconomic policies of recent years;
- A major investment programme in economic and social infrastructure;
- A commitment to a better regional distribution of public and private investment;
- The promotion of education and employment training policies attuned to the needs of the labour market and a special focus on those most at risk of unemployment;
- A multi-faceted approach to the promotion of Social Inclusion, including targeted interventions aimed at areas and groups affected by poverty and social exclusion throughout the community.

Since the issue of social inclusion has significant implications for the education system in the coming decade, it is of interest to note that the Development Plan envisages substantial investment in education and training, childcare and recreational infrastructure and investment in people. This will be done through lifelong learning and skills development, community development and family services. The objective is that employment is opened up to all sectors of society as this is seen to be the best way to counter poverty and social exclusion. The Plan includes targeted measures in the education sector in:

- Early Education
- School Completion
- Early Literacy
- Third Level Access Programme
- Traveller Education
- Career Guidance.

The Plan quotes a forthcoming Strategy Report from the National Economic and Social Council, which sets out a vision for Ireland in the next decade, reflecting recent economic and social progress and the challenges which must now be faced. The report recognises

that the foundations for a successful society are a dynamic economy and an inclusive society, incorporating a commitment to social justice, based on consistent economic development that is socially and environmentally sustainable. As well as economic and social inclusion, the strategy places a particular emphasis on adaptation to change, the Information Society, Lifelong Learning and balanced regional development.

As regards education and training, the National Development Plan will facilitate the achievement of the following specific objectives:

- Meeting the particular and diverse needs of specific groups in society, including those experiencing educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs;

- Facilitating the development of a system of lifelong learning, which includes the provision of accessible and flexible routes of progression between different parts of the system and which enables individuals to develop their skills to cope with the challenges of the information society in a situation of changing demands for skills;

- Enhancing the quality of the vocational training and education systems and in particular ensuring that the curricula and programmes offered to students at all levels of the system remain relevant in light of the ongoing and substantial economic and social changes facing the system;

- Providing the flexibility of provision in order to respond meaningfully to individual needs as well as to industry needs and to ensure equality of access particularly for those who are marginalised.

- Linking vocational training and education programmes to the skills needs of the market with a view to ensuring that a sufficient number of skilled persons is available to meet the changing needs of business and industry;

- Ensuring that the education system is equipped to increase its use of information and communications technologies and to meet the rapidly changing information technology skills needs of the economy;

- Ensuring that the education system, especially at third level, plays its key role in the achievement of the Plan strategy on balanced regional development;

- Providing opportunities so that every individual can attain an adequate level or literacy and numeracy skills;

- Enhancement of the knowledge base of the Irish economy and promoting entrepreneurship and adaptability through capability enhancement in research, science and technology including postgraduate training;

- Providing the physical infrastructure, in terms of buildings and equipment, to meet the needs of the education sector.

Investment in education during the period of the Plan will be concentrated on:

- Prevention of early school leaving
- Increasing the retention rate at second level
- Expanding adult and second chance education and training opportunities
- Widening access to third level education
- Improving the funding situation for Research, Technological Development and Innovation
- Establishment and continuous development of a coherent National Qualifications Framework which underpins a strategy of lifelong learning
- Supporting the requirements of the labour market.

The Educational Context

Education and the Irish Constitution

The Irish Constitution (1937) 'recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.[4]' Article 42 states that "The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children". It also asserts that "The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State". Article 42.4 adds: "The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation".

These articles of the Constitution have been interpreted as permitting the State to provide financial assistance to schools owned and controlled by the Churches, while not requiring the State to make direct provision for education at any level. In practice, this has resulted in a situation in Ireland where virtually all primary (elementary) and most second level schools are owned and controlled by the Churches and funded (over 90% of their cost) by the State. This is in contrast to the situation in Mexico where there is a constitutional separation between Church and State and where public education is independent of the churches. In Ireland the proportion of the school-going population which attends non-public-funded private schools at any level, is very low – probably less than 5%.

[4] Article 41 of the Irish Constitution, quoted in J.M. Kelly *The Irish Constitution* (3rd.edition) Dublin and London: Butterworths, 1994.

Educational Legislation

Until recently, there was very little legislation governing education in Ireland. However, the situation has recently changed and since 1997, three significant pieces of legislation have come into effect and a fourth will shortly be enacted. The 1998 Education Act is the most comprehensive of these acts. It sets out

- To make provision in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the State including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs;
- To provide generally for primary, post-primary, adult and continuing education and vocational education and training;
- To ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents, and the State for the education provided;
- To respect the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society and is conducted in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the State;
- To provide for the recognition and funding of schools and their management through boards of management;
- To provide for an inspectorate of schools;
- To provide for the role and responsibilities of principals and teachers;
- To establish the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and to make provision for it
- To provide for related matters.

In addition to the 1998 Education Act, the Universities Act of 1997 provides a legislative framework for universities. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, provides for the setting up of an authority which will co-ordinate and oversee education and training awards and qualifications in further and adult education. The authority will also promote and maintain procedures for access, transfer and progression within the further and higher education and training systems. The Education Welfare Bill (2000) will shortly be enacted and this will provide for the raising of the school leaving age to 16 as well as amending and updating existing school attendance legislation. It will also establish a comprehensive legislative and administrative system for dealing with school attendance problems and issues relating to the educational welfare of children generally.

The 1937 Constitution and the recent legislative measures provide the legal context for the Irish education system.

The Irish Educational System

The changing nature of Irish society and the dynamic development of the Irish economy are reflected in government educational policy priorities. The mission statement of the Department of Education and Science is "to ensure the provision of a comprehensive, cost-effective and accessible education system of the highest quality, as measured by international standards, which will

- Enable individuals to develop to their full potential as persons and to participate fully as citizens in society, and
- Contribute to social and economic development".

About one million children and young people are enrolled in full-time education in Ireland - about 50% at primary level; 40% in second level and further education; and about 10% in higher education.[5] Attendance in full-time education is compulsory from the age of 6 to the age of 15, but the upper age is shortly to be raised to 16. In practice, however, over 60% of four year olds and almost 90% of five year olds attend primary schools; and over 80% of young people complete second level education. In addition, there is widespread and growing provision for adult and continuing education in Ireland. In recent years, community education is playing an increasingly important role in providing educational opportunities – especially for the more marginalised groups in society, such as early schools leavers, travellers etc.

Public expenditure on education in Ireland accounts for 12.2% of total public expenditure (1990), compared to 11.8% for OECD countries as a whole. Total expenditure on education in Ireland is around 6% of GDP. In relative terms, per capita expenditure on primary education in Ireland is low – at less than $2,150 – well below the OECD mean. At secondary level, the situation is better with Ireland spending over $3,500 per student, close to the OECD mean. At third level, Ireland spends around $7,000 per student, also close to the OECD mean[6].

By OECD standards, the education system in Ireland has traditionally been a centralised system with policy decisions taken at central rather than regional or local level. There are no intermediate structures between the (Government) Department of Education and Science and the schools, except in the case of the vocational sector (see below). In general, the implementation of national educational policy is largely the responsibility of individual schools. In Mexico, the system has been federalised in recent years with considerable responsibility and power devolved to the States. However, it must be borne in mind that the total population of Ireland is less than 4 million, as compared with almost 100 million in Mexico. The total Irish population is less than the population of any one of the states of Mexico.

In Ireland, the education system consists of primary (elementary) schools for children aged 4 to 12, and second level education which is provided at two cycles – junior cycle or lower second level (12 – 15 years) and senior cycle or upper second level (15 – 18 years). On completion of second level education, about 70% of the age cohort proceed to either further education or training (including apprenticeship) or higher education (university, technological or teacher education).

There are about 426,000 pupils enrolled in just over 3,000 primary schools in Ireland, including about 90,000 in infant classes (i.e. 4 – 6 year olds). These schools are privately owned but publicly funded. Over 93% of them are owned and managed by the Catholic

[5] Dept. of Education.
[6] OECD, *Education at a Glance,* 1998.

Church authorities; about 5% by the Church of Ireland (Anglican); a small number are run by the Presbyterian Church; there is one Methodist, one Muslim and one Jewish school; and there are 18 multi-denominational schools. There are about 150 schools which provide education entirely through the medium of the Irish language. In terms of control and ownership, the elementary school system contrasts with that of Mexico where there is a constitutional separation between Church and State. However, we understand that many private schools in Mexico are run by Church groups.

In Ireland, 370,000 students are enrolled in the second level sector, attending a total of about 770 publicly aided or provided schools. 435 of these are secondary (academic) schools; 245 are vocational schools and the remainder (82) are comprehensive or community schools. Secondary schools, which educate about 60% of second level students, are privately owned and managed, either by religious communities or by Boards of Governors or individuals. Vocational education committees (locally elected) administer vocational schools, educating about 25% of all second-level students. The remaining 15% of pupils are enrolled in Community and Comprehensive schools, which are fully funded by the state.[7] Students normally remain in the same school for the six years of their second level schooling. Unlike Mexico where a system of selection exists for entry into upper secondary education, in Ireland all students are encouraged and expected to remain in school until the completion of upper secondary education.

Whereas less than a quarter of the age cohort completed secondary education in Ireland thirty years ago, to-day over 80% do so. Over 85% of these proceed to some form of further or higher education or training. It is generally accepted that the quality of the education provided for students who are academically inclined is high and that the educational standards attained by most graduates of Irish second level schools and higher education institutions compare favourably with graduates of other OECD countries.

However, problems still exist for less academically inclined pupils, for pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged families; for early school leavers, for travelling (gypsy) families, and for learners with disabilities. In the mid 1990s, it was estimated that over a quarter of young people in Ireland left school with inadequate or no qualifications. Various studies in Ireland and elsewhere have shown that those who leave school early without qualifications or with inadequate qualifications are at high risk of long-term unemployment and poverty. In OECD countries generally, higher levels of educational attainment are clearly associated, for individuals, with higher earnings, lower chances of unemployment and more skills that yield advantages to people as consumers and active citizens.[8].

The issues of educational disadvantage and social inclusion have been high on the Irish Government's agenda in recent years, and are a priority in the forthcoming National Plan. The 1998 Education Act reflects the government's commitment to addressing the issue of social and educational inequality. It includes among its objectives

[7] Dept. of Education, *Brief Description of the Irish Education System,* 1996.
[8] OECD Education Policy Analysis Paris: OECD/CERI, 1997.

"To promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education

To promote opportunities for adults, in particular adults who as children did not avail of or benefit from education in schools, to avail of educational opportunities through adult and continuing education".

To achieve this end, the act provides for the setting up of an educational disadvantage committee "to advise on policies and strategies to be adopted to identify and correct educational disadvantage."

It is quite clear from various policy documents that the commitment to alleviate disadvantage will continue to be a high priority for government in the years ahead. In an interview with the Education Editor of the *Irish Times* on his first day in office, Minister for Education and Science, Dr. Michael Woods stated that "policies to deal with literacy problems and educational disadvantage will be (his) main priority"[9]. He has since confirmed this commitment in a number of statements.

The issues of educational disadvantage and social inclusion will be further addressed by my colleague, Dr. Tom Kelleghan, later in this conference.

Curriculum and Assessment in Ireland

Primary Level

As already mentioned, primary (elementary) schools in Ireland cater for pupils between the ages of 4 and 12 years of age. The first two years are referred to as Junior and Senior Infants and the curriculum at this level emphasises informality and recognises the importance of play and its contribution to the child's learning experience. From 6 to 12 years of age, pupils progress from First to Sixth Class, completing sixth Class at about the age of 12. For the past thirty years, the primary school curriculum has been based on child-centred principles, emphasising the principles of guided discovery, of activity based learning and individual difference. There have been no national testing or national examinations at primary level since 1967, although most schools and teachers administer standardised reading and mathematics tests at defined intervals throughout a pupils' schooling.

The primary school curriculum has recently been revised (1999). While the revised curriculum recognises the importance of literacy and numeracy, it focuses in a fundamental way on the child as a learner, building on "the child's sense of wonder at the complexity of the world, the desire to understand it, and the spontaneous impetus to explore it through play". The curriculum is based on modern theories of learning and recognises that "conceptual development is not necessarily a linear process. It may take place on a number of planes simultaneously or through the making of an intuitive leap". It sees the child as an active agent in his or her own learning and provides opportunities for active engagement in a wide range of learning experiences.

[9] Irish Times, 31 January 2000.

The primary school curriculum is presented in seven curriculum areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects. These are

1. Language (Irish and English);
2. Mathematics;
3. Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE) - (history, geography and science);
4. Arts Education (visual arts, music and drama);
5. Physical Education;
6. Social, personal and health education;
7. Religious education.

The following table shows the suggested minimum weekly time framework for each curriculum area.

(Table 1 – to be inserted)

Curriculum guidelines / handbooks for primary schools are produced by the (national) Department of Education and Science but schools are free to interpret these guidelines in accordance with their pupils' needs. The 1998 Education Act requires every school to make arrangements for the preparation of a school plan and to ensure that the plan is regularly reviewed and updated. Such a plan would normally set out the school's curriculum policy and would include issues such as a behaviour and discipline policy, homework policy etc. The state does not prescribe specific textbooks – a range of textbooks and resources are produced by various publishers, based on the curriculum guidelines, and schools are free to purchase whatever textbooks they regard as most appropriate. This contrasts with what I understand to be the situation in Mexico where the state appears to have a greater say in determining the content and distribution of textbooks and of other resources.

Second Level

All second level pupils in Ireland follow the same three-year junior cycle curriculum regardless of whether they attend a secondary, vocational, community or comprehensive school. The Junior Certificate was introduced in 1989 to provide a single unified programme for students aged between 12 and 15 years of age and students sit a national public examination at the end of the three years cycle. Following the junior cycle, students proceed to a further two or three years in senior cycle. There is an optional one-year Transition Year Programme followed by a choice of three two-year Leaving Certificate programmes – the (established) Leaving Certificate; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied. The (established) Leaving Certificate has traditionally had a strong academic bias, although within the past twenty years or so, it has included an increasing number of practical subjects. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied were introduced within the past five years to provide more relevant and vocationally oriented programmes

for the growing numbers of young people who are staying on in full-time education after the Junior Certificate.

Junior Cycle

The junior cycle of the second level curriculum is a three year cycle, at the end of which pupils sit a national public examination called the Junior Certificate Examination, typically taking seven or eight subjects. All pupils sit an examination in Irish, English and Mathematics; the majority take History and Geography; a modern continental language, (French or German or Spanish or Italian) and science. There is a further range of over twenty subjects which pupils can opt to study – these include Music, Art, Technology, Business Studies, and many others. The primary objective of the Junior Certificate programme is to enable students to complete a broad, balanced and coherent course of study in a variety of curricular areas. The programme seeks to extend and deepen the quality of students' educational experience in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies and to prepare them for further study in senior cycle.

The Junior Certificate School Programme is an alternative approach to the Junior Certificate. It is specifically aimed at the potential early school leaver and for other students who have difficulty in coping with the junior cycle curriculum. In this programme, the teachers adapt the curriculum to make the whole school experience more relevant and meaningful for students at risk. The programme emphasises numeracy and literacy as well as personal and social needs. The emphasis is on the process of learning rather than on a terminal examination, on what students can do rather than on what they can't do. A system of profiling is used to provide affirmation of learning for pupils on this programme.

Senior Cycle

Students may spend up to three years in senior cycle. They may follow a two-year Leaving Certificate programme immediately after Junior Certificate, or they may opt to follow a Transition Year programme before a two-year Leaving Certificate. A student may follow the (established) Leaving Certificate course or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied.

The **Transition Year Programme** has as its overall mission the promotion of the holistic development of students and their preparation for their role as citizens. Its aims are:

- to give students space and time to mature humanly, through the use of an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and of experiential learning opportunities, free from the pressure of public examinations
- to improve students' learning strategies
- to give students an opportunity to experience the world of work and to reflect on that experience.

Teachers of Transition Year have greater flexibility and professional opportunities to design curricula, modules and short courses which are more tailored to the specific needs of their students than any other year of post-primary education. Parents, the community

and local enterprise are all encouraged to support students during Transition Year and so contribute to an education which addresses the demands and pleasures of life, work, sport and leisure. There is growing evidence that students who have taken the Transition Year Programme are more self-reliant learners when they enter third-level education than their peers.

The majority of Senior Cycle students choose the **established Leaving Certificate,** taking subjects at either Foundation[10], Ordinary or Higher Level. Students may choose from a total of 31 subjects. At the end of the two year programme, there are written terminal examinations for all subjects. In addition, there are oral and aural examinations for Gaeilge (Irish) and modern languages; practical and project tests in Music, Art, Engineering and Construction Studies; and a number of subjects – including Geography and History – allow for the option of allocating some marks to project or field work. However, this option is rarely availed of by schools.

The **Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme** is a two-year programme which comprises groupings of the subjects of the established Leaving Certificate Programme with some additional modules. The programme was first introduced in 1989. In 1994, it was expanded to broaden the choice of subjects and to strengthen the vocational content of the programme by including three link modules on Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience. The activities involved in the Link Modules include the organisation and running of mini-enterprises, visits to businesses and industry and investigations of the local community. Assessment of the Link Modules comprises two elements: Written Examination (40% of marks) and Portfolio of Coursework (60% of marks). Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme students receive the same certificate as established Leaving Certificate students. In addition their Certificate includes a statement of the results of the Link Modules (Pass, Merit, Distinction)

The Leaving Certificate Applied is intended to meet the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate Programmes. It is a self-contained two year programme, which is pupil-centred and involves a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based structure. Student achievement and performance are assessed in a number of ways. Students are required to complete a number of modules, each module representing a block of 40 hours. In order to be awarded credit each student must complete each module by attending the classes and out of school activities related to the module and by completing key assignments related to the module. This accounts at present for 40% of the total marks. Performance assessment of student tasks accounts for a further 27% of the total marks. Students complete a number of "tasks" in the course of the two years. The tasks are assessed by external examiners appointed by the Department of Education and Science. These tasks may be in a variety of formats - written, audio, video, artefact etc. Each student is also required to produce a report on the process of completing the task. This report may be incorporated in the evidence of task performance.

[10] Foundation level is available in two subjects - Irish and Mathematics.

In addition to the task assessments and ongoing accreditation for the completion of modules, students sit external examinations accounting for the remaining 33% of the total marks at the end of Year 2 in the following areas:

- English and Communication (oral, aural and written)
- Two Vocational Specialisms
- Mathematical Applications
- Language (Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and Modern European Languages -oral, aural and written)
- Social Education.

The Leaving Certificate Applied is offered in over 200 schools and centres. As of June 1999, approximately 8,000 students were enrolled on the programme. The most recent available figures indicate that over 90% of those who complete the Leaving Certificate Applied went directly into employment or into apprenticeships or on to further education courses.

In a study of the Leaving Certificate Applied carried out in 1996, the process of learning was examined and its importance in the context of life-long learning was emphasised. The Leaving Certificate Applied was considered to be a programme which can motivate students who had not been active in the process of learning, because it recognises their talents and abilities and affords them a wide range of learning opportunities. The study stated[11]:

> Assessment and certification can be regarded no longer as the end of the road but as benchmarks in a longer process. Put simply, what is involved is enabling students to develop a taste for further learning. Many students are happy as non-participants in further education, or are driven to participate by pragmatic considerations. If lifelong learning is to become more attractive to them, then what is required is a curriculum which increases the probability of developing and maintaining their self-esteem by increasing the range of opportunities available to them to process and assimilate information in a manner suited to themselves. The curriculum has to provide an opportunity to challenge them in a realistic fashion to do quality work and to enable them to see the merits and benefits of such effort. The Leaving Certificate Applied seeks to create a learning environment to facilitate such advancement.

Further and Higher Education

As already mentioned, about 85% of students who sit the Leaving Certificate proceed to further or higher education. Almost 20,000 of these attend one-year (occasionally two-year) Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses of a vocational nature. These courses generally lead directly into work but an increasing number of students are progressing from PLC courses onto higher education courses e.g. Certificate, Diploma or Degree courses in Colleges of Technology.

[11] Bray in Hogan, p. 106.

The higher education sector in Ireland comprises universities and institutes of technology as well as colleges of education and a small number of non-State aided private third level colleges. There are seven universities, each of which validates and awards its own qualifications as well as qualifications in institutions recognised by them, for example, colleges of education. There are five such colleges for primary teachers and a small number of colleges for teachers of specific subjects at second level such as Home Economics and Religious Studies. There are fourteen Institutes of Technology (which were set up from the 1970s onwards) to provide technical and technological education in all regions of the country. Some of the higher education institutions also have outreach centres, where some of their courses may be available at sites other than their main campus or campuses. The trend to off-campus higher education provision and the development of distance education, using information and communications technology, is being actively encouraged by government in order to improve accessibility to higher education and training throughout the country.

There are currently over 115,000 full-time students enrolled in higher education institutions in Ireland. This represents about 55% of the age cohort, about half of whom take degree level programmes. This proportion has grown from around 10% of the age cohort in the mid 1960s. Not only has the enrolment in higher education grown more than five fold since the 1960s, this growth in numbers has been accompanied by a significant increase in the range and diversity of courses and programmes. Growth is particularly evident in the disciplines of technology and business and has been accompanied by a wide range of innovative developments in the arts and the social sciences.

There is also considerable part-time provision of higher education courses in universities and institutes of technology. This provision is being further encouraged by government in the light of the rapidly changing needs and demands of the workforce and unprecedented developments in knowledge in all disciplinary areas.

The universities and institutes of technology play an important role in research and development, both basic and applied research. The government has recently increased the level of grant-aid available for research in higher education, especially in science and technology.

Lifelong Learning

Any analysis or discussion of the Irish educational system should take account of the government's stated commitment to lifelong learning. Recent policy documents highlight the Irish government's commitment to learning as a lifelong process and a White Paper has been published within the past month. In the preface to the 1998 Green Paper on Adult Education *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning,* the then Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, stated[12]:

[12] Dept. of Education and Science, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* – Green Paper on Adult Education, 1998.

> Lifelong learning marks a critical departure from the traditional understanding of the role of education in society. Providing learning opportunities over a life-span rather than only in the early years, widening recognition to embrace new forms of learning, recognising that learning takes place in a range of settings wider than schools and colleges, encouraging greater links with industry, and between the formal and informal sectors, and developing more flexible forms of provision, are all key elements of the concept. Above all, it means ensuring that quality services are accessible and responsive to the needs of young and adult alike, and that education policy and practice is designed to meet the diverse range of needs this entails.

When one considers education within a lifelong learning framework, issues relating to the relationship between the different levels of education, the transitions between these levels, and the ease of transfer between work and education are raised. A concern with learning through the life cycle also raises questions concerning the quality of the school experience in learning how to learn, as well as raising the issue of increased expenditure on education through the lifecycle[13].

In this regard, an Irish commentator has written[14]:

> One way or the other, the concept of lifelong learning poses a significant challenge to the system. It demands new modes of access, the recognition of experience and prior learning and of alternative ways of learning. Those who have left school with inadequate qualifications are a particular challenge: we want them to return to learning, to equip themselves for independence in the adult world and (hopefully) in working life, and to develop the ability to learn throughout life. To do this, their present position must be our starting point.

These and other issues relating to lifelong learning will be addressed later in this conference by my colleague Professor John Coolahan.

Other themes and topics which will be addressed in more depth by my colleagues at this conference will include Information and Communications Technology by Jerome Morrissey and the overall question of Quality Promotion and assurance, especially in Teacher Education, by Dr. Seamus McGuinness. We look forward to sharing our policies, practices and experiences in Irish education with our Mexican colleagues. We are confident that this will prove to be a fruitful and beneficial conference for all of us, and that it will be the beginning of ongoing dialogue and communication between educationists in Ireland and Mexico in the years ahead.

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[13] Dept. of Education and Science, *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*, pp. 18/19.
[14] D. Stokes, *Early School Leavers: Promoting Arenas of Achievement,* 1996.