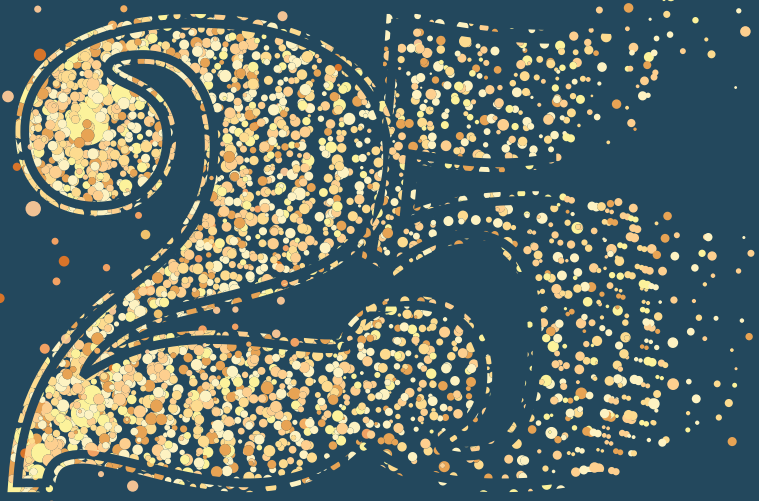
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25 YEARS of NAPD

Áine Hyland

It is fascinating to look back over the last 25 years in Irish education and to realise how much has been achieved. It is a case of "a lot done – more to do". There will always be more to do in education. But at the risk of being attacked by those who see the glass as half-empty rather than half-full, I would sum up the past quarter of a century as one of the more positive periods for education since the foundation of the State one hundred years ago.

The Education Act, introduced by Micheál Martin as Minister for Education in 1998, was a milestone for Irish education. It was a courageous, all-encompassing and ambitious Act – the only comprehensive education legislation ever passed for Irish education. The 1998 Act not only opened the door for changes and developments, but by enshrining in legislation the rights of all young people to education, it was transformative for the marginalised in our society, especially for those from less advantaged backgrounds and those with additional educational needs.

The following whistle-stop tour of education developments since 1998 summarises what was achieved – and what has yet to be achieved.

The publication of a White Paper on Early Childhood Education in 1999 by Micheál Martin gave formal recognition for the first time to early education as a separate sector in its own right. It focused on children from birth to six years. It covered the whole spectrum of educational needs: the development of very young children in the home, supports to parents concerning how best to help their children to learn, a wide range of supports for private providers and voluntary/community groups and a strategy to enhance the quality of infant education in primary schools.

It included specific additional measures in respect of the priority target groups – the disadvantaged and children with special needs. During the subsequent twenty-five years the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme was set up; a Minister for Children was appointed; a formal curriculum for early childhood (Aistear) was implemented and, over the period, public funding increased from virtually nothing in 1999 to almost €1 billion in 2022.

However, it's not all perfect. The decision to devolve early childhood education to private providers, was in my view, a lost opportunity. The requirement that early childhood educators should hold only a minimum qualification at level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework was also wrong. And the decision to have two separate sets of inspectors – one from the Department of Children and one from the Department of Education should never have been made.

Hopefully in the coming years some of these mistakes will be rectified.

At primary school level, Ireland now has a much more diverse pupil population than was the case twenty-five years ago. Almost 15% of pupils in primary schools today were born outside Ireland and many of these pupils do not have English as a first language. There is now a clear mismatch between the type of school sought by parents for their children and the current ownership and management of national schools. Parent-led campaigns for multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna increased during the past 25 years and while there are now more such schools than there were then, 89% of national schools are still under denominational (church) patronage and management.

Efforts by government to transfer existing church-owned schools to more democratic patronage (following the recommendations of the Report on Patronage and Pluralism in 2012) have not been successful - with only about 10 such schools divested between 2012 and 2022.

The introduction by Minister Mary Hanafin of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme in 2005, following the publication of the reports of the Educational Disadvantage Committee, provided additional resources to designated schools in disadvantaged areas. While this scheme is not perfect, it has brought coherence into previous ad hoc arrangements and while it has not yet bridged the gap between the attainment of pupils in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, it has gone some way towards narrowing that gap.

However, DEIS did nothing for the more than 50% of children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds who do not attend DEIS schools – this is an anomaly which I hope will be addressed in the coming years.

A new Primary School curriculum in 1999 enhanced and strengthened the child-centred approach of the 1971

curriculum and provided updated and detailed syllabi in all subject areas. This curriculum has recently been updated – whether it is an improvement or not on the 1999 curriculum has yet to be proven. Whole school evaluation which replaced traditional school inspection is also undergoing reform – again it's too soon to judge whether this will be an improvement or not.

Provision at primary school level for children with special educational needs improved significantly during the period under review. The National Council for Special Education was set up as a statutory body in 2003. The EPSEN Act (2004) to provide for the education of people with special educational needs was all encompassing and was widely welcomed - but disappointingly, almost twenty years later, some of the key provisions of the act have not yet been commenced.

Additional resources (specialist teachers, special needs assistants, bespoke facilities) were made available to enable children with additional needs to attend mainstream schools and special classes were also provided where required. The total budget to support students with special needs at primary and post-primary levels in 2023 was over €2.6 billion, more than 25% of the total education budget.

But issues still remain to be addressed, especially the provision of appropriate and specialised training for teachers of these pupils.

At post-primary level, the Community and Comprehensive school sector as well as the ETB sector has grown and the number of voluntary secondary schools has declined. While the number of priests, brothers and nuns in these schools had begun to decline twenty-five years ago, the decline accelerated over the period and there are now almost no members of religious orders teaching in post-primary schools – a development predicted fifty years ago in the Future of Irish Religious Education (FIRE) report – but widely disbelieved at that time.

Enrolment in post-primary schools grew significantly in the past quarter of a century, driven both by demographic factors and by a very high school completion rate. Ireland now has one of the highest completion rates of Senior Cycle education in the OECD – with more than 95% of students completing. However, alternative educational provision is still inadequate for the small number of young people for whom mainstream schooling is not suitable. This issue is currently being addressed and will hopefully result in suitable educational provision for the full cohort of young people.

Despite expectations at the beginning of the 21st century that major curriculum reform at both at Junior and Senior Cycle was imminent, progress has been slow. The reformed Junior Cycle was examined in full for the first time in 2022, but with only 10% of the marks in most subjects allocated to class-based assessment tasks, the emphasis continues to be on the State examinations at the end of third year.

At Senior Cycle, the much-hyped Leaving Certificate Applied, introduced in the mid-1990s, has not been as widely taken up as had been hoped. The vast majority of Senior Cycle students (almost 90%) sit the (Established) Leaving Certificate, which is not necessarily the best choice for all who choose it.

A number of new Leaving Certificate subjects have been introduced in the past decade (such as Physical Education, Politics & Society and Computer Studies) and revised specifications (syllabi) have been introduced in some other subjects, but controversy persists about the recently-revised format of subject specifications, where very limited details or teacher guidelines are provided by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

The setting up of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in 2002 led to greater independence and transparency of State examinations with impressive initiatives such as access by candidates to their marked scripts and full and accessible information about marking schemes and their application. However, the separation of curriculum reform by the NCCA from the State Examinations system administered by the SEC, has resulted in an increasing disconnection and a lack of alignment between subject syllabi and the annual state examination papers, much to the frustration of teachers and students.

Teacher education saw significant developments during the period, with the passing of the Teaching Council Act in 2001 and the setting of up the Teaching Council in 2006. Minister Ruairi Quinn's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2011 added an additional year to teacher education programmes, and while this was initially welcomed, it has had the unintended consequence of contributing to the current shortage of teachers, especially at post-primary level.

The failure of the Department of Education to engage in focused and targeted forecasting of teacher supply and demand, in spite of numerous requests for regular and systematic forecasts, has exacerbated the current and ongoing shortages. The reduction in public service salaries after the economic crash of 2008 led to an increase in the number of trained teachers emigrating to countries where salaries and working conditions are better than those in Ireland. As various financial restrictions are lifted in Ireland, it is to be hoped that some of these teachers will return and that the outflow of teachers will be stemmed.

In spite of these challenges, it is encouraging to see that the teaching profession is still regarded by school-leavers as an attractive option and that Ireland continues to attract a very high calibre of students into the teaching profession. However, the lack of ethnic and race diversity in the teaching profession needs to be addressed and this will be a significant challenge in the years ahead. Developments during the past 25 years to support school leadership has been well documented in recent issues of Leader – and much of this support owes its origins in the setting up of NAPD and IPPN twenty-five years ago.

The report of the Commission on the Points System in 1999 examined in depth issues that were being raised about the transition from second to third level education. The report acknowledged the challenges and difficulties encountered by students because of the imbalance between the demand for higher education programmes and the number of places available.

While the report failed to get agreement about an alternative to the Points System, it made a number of recommendations about the amelioration of its consequences, especially for students from less advantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs.

The subsequent Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) schemes, set up by the Higher Education Institutions with the support of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) led to an increase in the numbers of such students accessing higher education through non-traditional routes. It is estimated that more than 25% of today's higher education students have entered higher education through routes other than the Points System. There has also been an increase in the number of mature students, especially those engaged in upskilling courses, many of which are now being offered on a blended basis, with the use of technology, while also recognising that learning can and does take place in the workplace as well as on higher education campuses.

The enactment of the Technological Universities Act of 2018 laid the ground for major change in the Higher Education landscape. The network of Institutes of Technology around the country has now been transformed into five Technological Universities (TUs).

The setting up of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the appointment of a bespoke Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, in 2020 has contributed to this transformation. Links between the Further Education (FE) sector and Higher Education (HE) institutions, which had been slowly building since the early 2000s have been strengthened and accelerated. New models of apprenticeships have been forged. Agreements have been reached between FE providers and TUs to enable students to undertake the first two years of some degree programmes in an FE institution and to then transfer seamlessly into a university setting.

These developments promise to address some of the difficulties of access and accommodation encountered by post-secondary school students, especially those who live at a distance from a university campus. Despite decreased per capita core government funding for universities during the period under review, Irish universities continue to rank among the top echelons of universities worldwide and are highly regarded nationally and internationally by both students and employers.

No overview of developments over the past twenty-five years would be complete without mentioning the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns between 2020 and 2022, as well as school closures, on education at all levels – not just in Ireland but all over the world. Teachers and their pupils had to pivot at a few days' notice from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching and learning – with all the change and transformation that this necessitated. Student and teacher flexibility was impressive.

While some students and their families were more severely affected than others because of issues such as housing, overcrowding, lack of technology, limited broadband access etc., three years later the available evidence suggests that academic learning was not as seriously impacted as initially feared. However, Covid exacerbated physical and mental health issues, which may well be more evident in years to come and the consequences of which are still unknown.

And what of the future of education? Recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and emerging digital technologies present new challenges. Much has been written in recent months about the threat which ChatGPT and other such digital tools pose for teaching and learning as we know it. However, education must be open to change and while new technologies present a challenge, they also provide new opportunities for teachers and learners.

Scepticism about new technologies in education is not new. About 2,300 years ago, a Greek philosopher Plato, in his treatise *Phaedrus*, expressed concern about the then growing popularity of writing and literacy (as opposed to debating and oracy) as an educational tool. He wrote: *"This invention (i.e. writing) will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it … you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with since they are not wise, but only appear wise".*

This quotation is as relevant today as it was two and a half thousand years ago.

We need to be open to change and to recognise the educational potential of new technological tools. AI tools, such as Chat GPT may present challenges but it has the potential to improve and transform the educational systems of the future, provided that we as teachers recognise and harness it, instead of regrading it as a threat. During generations past, despite Plato's fear, writing did not supersede the need for human teachers nor reduce the significance and importance of the teaching profession.

On the contrary, as literacy became a more important and central part of human progress and development, teachers became more (not less) necessary. The human and interpersonal dimension of teachers and their interaction and empathy with their students, will always be central to good education and no technological development will change that.



Áine Hyland is Emeritus Professor of Education and former Vice-President of UCC. She chaired and was a member of various government committees on education, including the Commission on the Points System and the Statutory Educational Disadvantage Committee. In recognition of her contribution to Irish education, she has been awarded a number of honorary doctorates. She was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2018.