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50 Years on: Reflecting on the Legacy of Free Second Level Education.

"The Context for Change and Lessons for To-Day".

Talk given by Áine Hyland at the ASTI Education Conference in the Gresham Hotel, Dublin on 28th April 2018.

Background

This paper provides a backdrop to the birth of free second level education in Ireland in September 1967. It sets the context for change and highlights some lessons for to-day.

I was a civil servant (an Executive Officer) in the Department of Education from 1959 to 1964 and worked as a research assistant with the *Investment in Education* team from September 1962 to September 1964. I met my husband, Bill Hyland, who was a member of the Investment in Education team at that time, and when we got married in late 1964, I had to resign from the civil service on marriage and went to live in Geneva where Bill was then working with a U.N. agency, the Economic Commission for Europe.

Following the publication of the *Investment in Education* report at the end of 1965, Bill was offered a job as Senior Statistician with the Department of Education in Dublin and we came back to Ireland in 1966. Bill was totally committed to equality of educational opportunity and the statistics published in the *Investment in Education* report pointed towards the need to introduce free second level education as a first step towards achieving equality for all young people. How the challenges surrounding full participation in second level schooling would be resolved dominated conversations between myself and Bill throughout 1965 and 1966, leading up to the birth of free second level education - as well as the birth of two of our children – the first in 1965 and the second in September 1966 – just two weeks after Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley announced his plans to introduce free second level education in Ireland.

I kept a lot of papers and drafts of papers from that period – hence my contribution today draws not just on my own memories and recollections but also on previously published and unpublished materials. While a lot has been written about the introduction of free education and Donogh O'Malley's role in making it happen, the influence of the *Investment in Education* report (Department of Education, 1965) and the role played by the Development Branch of the Department of Education in initiating and implementing the free education scheme has tended to be ignored or at best, under-estimated.

The provision of second level education in Ireland before 1967:

Before 1967, post-primary education was provided in (voluntary) secondary schools; vocational schools; secondary tops; preparatory colleges and juniorates of religious orders and congregations. Although government funding for voluntary secondary schools was limited, and all schools had to charge fees, the numbers of pupils attending secondary education grew from about 25,000 in the mid-1920s to 80,000 in the early 1960s. The number of secondary schools had grown from 283 to 526 during the same period.

Until the early 1960s, educational policy-makers saw no need to improve participation rates in post-primary education.

The report of the Council of Education on the Curriculum of the Secondary School 1962

A Council of Education was set up by Minister Richard Mulcahy in 1950 and In November 1954, the council was asked to report on the curriculum of the secondary school. Its deliberations were long-drawn out, and its *Report on the Curriculum of the Secondary School* was not completed unti1960 and was not published until 1962. It was a conservative report, and while it contained some interesting analyses of the secondary school curriculum of the time, it saw no

need for any significant expansion of secondary schooling stating (Department of Education, 1962):

> The unqualified scheme of "free secondary education for all" is utopian: if only for financial reasons…… There are also objections on educational grounds. One of these is that only a minority of pupils would be capable of profiting by secondary (grammar school) education …. Furthermore, if secondary education were universally available free for all, the incentives to profit by it would diminish and standards would inevitably fall.

However, before the report was published, Ireland had begun to change. T.K Whitaker's first report on Economic Expansion had been published in 1958, and in October 1959, within six months of his appointment as Minister for Education, Patrick Hillery had announced that government policy was to 'bring about a situation in which all children will continue their schooling until they are at least 15 years of age …..Our immediate policy is to increase the facilities for post-primary education' (*Dáil Debates*, vol. 177, cols. 470 – 1, 28/10/1959, quoted in McManus, 2014, p. 103).

Interim Report of a Department of Education Committee on Post-Primary Education, December 1962

In June 1962, a committee was set up within the Department of Education to consider the future development of post-primary education 'particularly in its social aspects.' In November 1962, it produced an interim report (the Duggan report) which recommended "a compulsory and free period of post-primary education for all Irish children", stating that (Department of Education, 1962):

> a comprehensive system …. a common form of post-primary course, extending over a three year period, should be available both in existing vocational and secondary schools….. The units we envisage following this common course would be termed "Junior Secondary Schools". They should aim at operating with a minimum of 120 pupils i.e. an annual intake of a minimum of 40 pupils….

However, the report recommended that senior secondary school courses should NOT be available free.

From that point onwards, until September 1966 when Minister O'Malley announced his free education scheme, the position held by senior policy-makers in the Department was that a common junior cycle should be provided for all pupils, that an annual intake of 40 pupils would be sufficient to maintain a viable second level school, but that free senior cycle secondary school courses should not be free.

Investment in Education Report (December 1965)

The *Investment in Education* report, was completed in mid-1965 and published in December of that year. The report was a fact-finding, empirical analysis of the Irish educational system. It highlighted significant disparities in participation rates in full-time education according to social group. It pointed out that 35% of pupils left full-time education either during or at the end of primary school, most of whom had not passed the Primary Cert exam; fewer than 50% completed junior cycle education and only 20% completed Leaving Certificate. Fewer than 4% of the cohort (about 2,000) went on to university, and up to 20% of these either failed to get a degree or dropped out before completion. Young people from professional backgrounds were at least five times more likely to complete senior cycle than children of the unskilled workers or the unemployed and were more than 25 times more likely to enter university.

There were also significant disparities in participation between those from rural backgrounds and those from urban backgrounds, with distance from the nearest post-primary school identified as a barrier to participation. At the age of 14, one-third of the age cohort left full- time education. By the age of 15, more than a half had left and by the age of 16 almost two-thirds of the age group were no longer

at school. The report emphasised that 'the main areas in which improvements might be sought are as follows':

1. The number who leave school without having reached primary cert level
2. The low rate of participation in post-primary by children from social groups F and G (unskilled, semi-skilled, unemployed etc.)
3. The high rate of early school leaving from junior cycle
4. The small proportion of continuation pupils who reach third level
5. The low rate of participation in university – and the relatively low certificate attainment of many entrants.

The report contained numerous statistical and analytic tables which were to provide an invaluable basis for subsequent educational planning and had a major influence of subsequent policy-making. In 1986, Seán O'Connor, who was head of the Development Branch and subsequently Secretary of the Department wrote (O'Connor, 1986, p. 10):

> The importance of the (*Investment in Education)* report to the Department of Education cannot be over-emphasised. The public were now aware of the deficiencies and inequalities of the system and remedial action could no longer be postponed.

The report has since been described as "a devastating analysis of the Irish educational system", and that it made "a compelling case for radical reform".

Annexes and Appendices of the *Investment in Education* Report

Six months after the *Investment in Education* report was published, a 750-page volume of annexes and appendices was published. The timing of the publication of the Annexes and Appendices coincided with the publication of the National Industrial and Economic Council's report on *Investment in Education* by which time government had effectively accepted the findings of the report and had decided that action would have to be taken to address the inequalities which had

been highlighted. As a result, the annexes and appendices, which contained wide-ranging and previously unavailable statistical detail, received little or no publicity, although they included material and data which had very significant implications for subsequent policy development.

This was particularly true about the School Location Analysis (Chapter XII.B of the Annexes and Appendices) which suggested a number of different options for a nationwide system of post-primary education. (Department of Education, 1965, pp. 393-453).

A key table in the School Location analysis was the table showing the distance of national school pupils from their nearest post-primary school. This table showed that almost 40% of young people were attending a national school which was located at least 5 miles from the nearest post-primary school.

Another important table in the Annexes and Appendices was table 18 of Appendix V which showed the proportion of pupils attending secondary schools charging various levels of (tuition) fees. This table showed that 62% of all day pupils attended schools which charged less than £15 p.a.; 74% of pupils attended schools which charged less than £20 p.a. and 81% of pupils attended schools which charged less than £25 p.a. With this information, it would be possible to estimate the cost of abolishing tuition fees and introducing a grant in lieu of fees, when free second level education was introduced.

The School Location Analysis also provided information on the age of school buildings, the facilities available in them and the potential costs of replacing or upgrading school buildings where necessary. Because of the information provided in the report and appendices, policy decisions from here on in could be evidence based. So for example, when Donogh O'Malley made his historic announcement about the introduction of free post-primary education in

September 1966, he made that announcement with knowledge of the resource implications of such a policy.

George Colley, Minister for Education, May 1965 to July 1966:

George Colley was appointed Minister for Education in May 1965. He stated that it was his intention to raise the school-leaving age to 15 in 1970, and to develop a system of secondary education which would provide junior cycle schooling for all – to be followed by two years in senior cycle. This would coincide with extending the then two-year course in vocational schools to three years. Post-primary education would be organised on comprehensive lines 'wherever conditions are favourable.' Colley also announced the setting up of the Development Branch, to which my husband Bill was appointed some months later.

Two 'Planning' Papers: (a) Notes on the Organisation of Secondary Education in a Sample Rural Area, and (b) Financial Assistance for Post-primary Students.

When Bill came back to Dublin to take up the post of senior statistician in the Development Branch, he got down to work immediately, and drafted a number of papers suggesting how post-primary schooling for all could be delivered in Ireland. Among his papers, there are two documents which were written in summer 1966 – a few months before Donogh O'Malley's announced the free education scheme on 20th September 1966. The first paper was entitled *Notes on the Organisation of Secondary Education in a Sample Rural Area,* and the second one was entitled *Financial Assistance for Post-Primary Students.*

(a) Notes on the Organisation of Secondary Education in a Sample Rural Area,

This 20-page paper expressed scepticism about the Department's plans at that time for expanding post-primary provision, asking: 'Are they bold enough? Do

they go far enough? The contention of these notes is that they may not.' The paper criticised the Departments's proposals at that time for extending and reorganising secondary education, which were based on minimum units for the junior cycle of 6 classes and 150 pupils (an intake of 50 pupils per annum) and for the senior cycle 4 classes and 100 pupils. It went on to set out a number of general planning considerations emphasising the issue of school size and geographical locations, and stating:

> In the majority of West European countries with which Ireland will have increasing economic and other ties, far reaching transformations in the education system have already or are in the process of taking place. The time of change is not by any means at an end. Ireland has the inestimable advantage of deciding relatively late on the reshaping of its own system and is able to profit from the mistakes and experiments of others. It would be a great pity if this advantage was whittled away and she entered on the task of educational renewal with one hand tied behind her back ***because of an insufficiently bold forward view***. (This author's italics).

The paper expressed concern that:

> the present plan based largely on minimum sizes of secondary school of 150 and 100 will fix on the rural areas of the country a system of secondary education by the lowest common denominator, restrictive of educational opportunity, ill adapted to change and limited in its ability to utilise high cost resources economically and efficiently…. The first major move forward in Irish secondary education is likely in the rural areas to be based too often on the smallest equivalent unit. ***The national eye should surely be lifted for this vital service towards a somewhat loftier horizon.*** (This author's italics).

The paper went on to discuss factors to be taken into account in determining the size of the school unit in relation to effective resource use. It discussed the deployment of teachers, especially in subjects where there was a scarcity of teachers e.g. "Science, Maths, Modern Languages." It explored the probability of far reaching changes in teaching methods during the next generation "which are likely to alter both the size and nature of teaching groups" and the implications of these changes for the design of school buildings. Taking Co. Mayo as an

example, the paper set out detailed projections, based on statistics collected for the School Location analysis, of the likely enrolment at the 17 centres in the county which at that time had some form of post-primary provision. The paper then categorised these centres into groups, geographically and by size, on the basis that none of the schools would have fewer than a four-form entry every year, i.e that each school would have an enrolment of at least 300 in the junior cycle and 200 in senior cycle. Where a centre could not achieve this size, the paper envisaged that the centre would be deemed unviable and would be amalgamated into the next geographically viable centre.

The second paper, prepared at around the same time was entitled 'Financial Assistance for Post-Primary Students.'

(a) Financial Assistance for Post-Primary Students (Prepared in the Development Branch).

This provided a detailed analysis and cost estimates of providing free post-primary education for all pupils up to the age of 15. It suggested that one possibility would be to offer a grant in lieu of fees of £10 per pupil in junior cycle to schools with a stated fee of £15 and a grant of £15 to schools with a stated fee of £20. (The justification for not offering the same grant in lieu of fees as the fee charged was that 'all secondary give free places and accept reduced fees in hardship cases and in addition they have collection difficulties'). However, on balance, it was recommended that it would be better to offer a flat grant in lieu of fees of £15 per pupil to all secondary schools willing to forego school fees[1].

The paper also stated that financial assistance would be required for 'poor children' in junior cycle to meet the cost of books, stationery, transport etc. 'So far as the very poor child is concerned free tuition is not enough – he

[1] In the context of the current practice of many secondary schools of seeking a "voluntary contribution" from parents, it is worth noting that the paper added: "It would be an express condition of the State grant that the school would provide free education for all day pupils taking the Intermediate Certificate course".

will not have the money to pay for the books and stationery he will need…..It is necessary therefore to ensure that the poor child will be provided with the books and accessories needed for his course.' The paper estimated that approximately 10% of pupils would require such extra financial assistance. The paper also emphasised that free education, including 'a larger subsidy for books and accessories' should be available for 'poor children' to take their education up to Leaving Certificate.

It argued that there was no need to provide a grant in lieu of fees to all senior cycle pupils, stating that 'school fees in this country, with some exceptions are very moderate and well within the compass of middle-income groups.' The paper stated that a scheme of financial assistance should be available, 'based on ability and graduated according to income to the low-income group to enable them to proceed to university or technological college.' **It proposed 'to confine additional State support to the group with income below say £12 a week … and for those we propose an additional grant of £15 per pupil to the school.'**

Bill not only envisaged free junior cycle education for all, sooner rather than later, but he held strong views about removing barriers to participation for children of 'poorer' families, by providing additional financial support (including grants to compensate for loss of earnings) up to and including third level education.[2]

Appointment of Donogh O'Malley as Minister for Education 13th July 1966

On 7th July 1966, shortly before the Dáil went into summer recess, the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, made an important speech on education in which he stated that the recent National Industrial and Economic Council commentary on the *Investment in Education* report emphasised the need for a very considerable expansion of

[2] Bill regularly raised the issue of "opportunity costs" - arguing that fees, transport and other costs associated with school attendance were not the only barriers which prevented those from lower socio-economic backgrounds from participating in education. He was of the view that the loss of potential earnings had to be factored into any scheme that targeted full participation in post-primary education.

financial outlay on educational development. He added (cited in Walsh, 2009, p. 159):

> To an ever-increasing extent the policy of the Government will be directed to this, and we will have to endure the political criticisms which it may evoke from the unthinking, as other desirable developments are necessarily slowed down to enable this essential educational programme to be fulfilled.

In his speech, Lemass pledged that the government would give education 'the priority it deserves' in the future allocation of government funds. On the 13th July 1966, Lemass appointed Donogh O'Malley as Minister for Education. A fortnight later, in a letter dated 29th July to the Taoiseach, O'Malley made it clear that he had more radical and immediate plans than his predecessors.

Memorandum from Donogh O'Malley to the Taoiseach 7th September 1966

Shortly after his appointment as Minister for Education, O'Malley raised the question of free post-primary education with Seán O'Connor who advised the Minister to wait until 1970 when the school leaving age would be raised. (O'Connor, 1986, p. 141). As indicated earlier in this chapter, this had been the policy of the Department officials since 1962. However, as also indicated earlier, Bill Hyland had reservations about this policy and had already drawn up a plan, including costings, for introducing free post-primary education. Consequently, when O'Malley asked that a scheme of free post-primary education be prepared by the Development Branch, much of the material for such a scheme was already available. Seán O'Connor admitted as much some years later. When O'Malley asked him how long it would take to draft a plan for free education, he (O'Connor) said 'Six weeks.' O'Malley wanted it 'for the following Monday,' and O'Connor acknowledged that a short deadline could be met because 'in fact a fair amount of the work had already been done in the Department and we weren't really starting from scratch' (Christina Murphy, 10 September 1986, quoted in O'Dubhlaing, 1997). Within a week or two, Sean O'Connor, Bill Hyland and Seán O'Mahony had drafted the outline of the proposals which formed the basis

of O'Malley's memorandum to the Taoiseach on 7th September (O'Connor, 1986). This outline contained much of the material that Bill Hyland had included in his earlier musings and papers.

The memorandum of 7th September 1966 set out two possible schemes for free post-primary education. Scheme A provided for free education up to Intermediate Certificate level for all pupils in vocational and comprehensive schools as well as all day pupils in secondary schools which charged an annual fee of no more than £20. Senior cycle education would be means-tested and would be free for pupils whose family income was less than £12 a week. Scheme B would provide free post-primary education for all pupils up to Leaving Cert level in vocational and comprehensive schools and in secondary schools which charged fees of £20 or less. The memorandum also included details of a transport scheme and additional subsidies for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a covering letter with this memorandum, O'Malley told the Taoiseach that he proposed to make a speech shortly in which he would refer to some of the matters referred to in the memorandum (Horgan, 1997, pp. 298-9).

Announcement by Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, on 10th September 1966

Three days later, before the Taoiseach or the Cabinet had an opportunity to consider the schemes outlined in the memorandum, O'Malley made his now famous speech at the annual conference of the National Union of Journalists in Dun Laoghaire announcing that as from September 1967, every child in the country would be able to avail of free post-primary education. In his speech, he condemned the inequalities in the Irish education system, pointing out that 'every year some 17,000 of our children finishing their primary school course do not receive any further education.' He continued:

> This means that almost one in three of our future citizens are cut off at this stage from the opportunities of learning a skill, and denied the benefits of cultural development that go with further education. This is a dark stain on the national conscience. For it means that some one-third of our people have been condemned – the great majority through no fault of their own – to be part-educated unskilled labour, always the weaker, who go to the wall of unemployment or emigration.

He proposed to introduce a scheme 'from the coming school year' whereby no child would be prevented by lack of funds from completing the Intermediate and the Leaving Certificate courses. As well as providing free education in vocational and comprehensive schools, and abolishing fees 'in the general run of secondary schools' he announced that funding would be made available to provide books and equipment to pupils whose families could not afford to buy them. He also intimated that lack of finance would no longer be a barrier to participation in higher education, although he did not elaborate on this.

The publicity he achieved for his announcement was more than either he or any of his advisers had anticipated. The *Sunday Press* and the *Sunday Independent* the following day (11th September) gave details of the speech on their front pages. The three daily newspapers covered the announcement on Monday 12th, with an editorial in the *Irish Press* stating that O'Malley's proposal would 'help to lift poorer children out of the serfdom of ignorance.' An editorial in the *Irish Times* stated:

> Caution, not untinged with scepticism, may well be the first reaction of many because of the pace and timing of this burst of speed, but it should be welcomed. The scheme will cost us dear, but a sense of proportion will remind us that if we can pay £15 a head subsidy for a heifer or a calf, we can afford to think in generous terms for the education of a child.

But reaction back in the Department of Finance was much less enthusiastic. Both the Secretary of the Department of Finance, T.K. Whitaker, and the Minister for

Finance, Jack Lynch, were very annoyed that the announcement had been made without the prior approval of the Department or the Minister for Finance. Jack Lynch was out of the country at the time and had no prior knowledge of O'Malley's proposal. Whitaker was very critical of O'Malley's failure to follow usual procedures and to obtain approval from the Department of Finance in advance. Whitaker complained to Lemass by memorandum on 12th September (NAI, DT, 96/6/356S12891F, letter from Whitaker to Lemass 12/09/106):

> The free schooling policy has not been the subject of any submission to the Dept. of Finance, has not been approved by the government, has certainly not been examined from the financial (whatever about the educational) aspect, and therefore should have received no advance publicity, particularly of the specific and definite type involved in Mr. O'Malley's statement.

However, it is likely that Lemass knew when he met O'Malley on 7th September, that O'Malley was planning to make the announcement. In a subsequent letter, Whitaker said that when he met the Taoiseach to discuss his (Whitaker's) memorandum of 12th September, 'while he (Lemass) did not expressly say so, I deduced from what he said (and the smile on his face) that he had personally authorised Donogh O'Malley to make this announcement' (O'Dubhlaing, 1999).

There was widespread support for O'Malley's announcement. Tom O'Donnell, then a Fine Gael TD in O'Malley's constituency, later stated (cited in Browne, 2006, pp. 86-7):

> It was a bold and brilliant move. Donogh was very pragmatic; he always saw the bigger picture. The idea of free education didn't originate with him but that's beside the point. He saw an opportunity to enact a massive change and he delivered on it. He knew exactly what he was doing….

Seamus O' Buachalla wrote (O' Buachalla 1988, p. 284):

> O'Malley's free education and transport schemes were formed from some very deep convictions on the social role of education, the innate injustice of inequality and the long-term national benefit to be derived from expanding educational opportunity. …. He was keenly aware of the fate

> of those, 17,000 in number, who never transferred from primary to post-primary, whose formal education ended at 14 …

Subsequent commentators have highlighted the significance of O'Malley's decision. In 2005, Dermot Keogh wrote (Keogh 2005, p, 284):

> The most dramatic development in the educational sector in the 1960s was when Donogh O'Malley announced the introduction of free post-primary education. The announcement, made on 11th September 1966, may have taken cabinet colleagues by surprise, but it is almost certain that the O'Malley speech was a ploy used often by Lemass to anticipate opposition and get a radical shift in policy approved by acclamation. This pre-empted interminable cabinet discussion and blocking tactics by the Department of Finance. Educational planning in the 1960s had been moving inexorably in that direction.

Memorandum to the Government 11th November 1966:

A subsequent and detailed submission from the Department of Education to the Department of Finance on 11th November 1966 provided costings of the proposed scheme under four headings:– Free Tuition; Free Books and Maintenance; University Education and Transport. However, the proposals as eventually approved by the Dept. of Finance did not include the additional subsidy for maintenance for "poorer children" as proposed in Bill Hyland's paper so that the dream of "equality of educational opportunity" was never fully realised.

The path to implementation was not without its obstacles. Between O'Malley's announcement in September 1966 and the implementation of his plan a year later, O'Malley was to encounter some bitter opposition, but he was determined to proceed with his plan. His speech in the Senate in February 1967 encapsulated his frustration but also his determination (Senate reports vol. 62, 9th Feb 1967):

> I know I am up against opposition and serious organised opposition but they are not going to defeat me on this. I shall tell you further that I shall expose them and I shall expose their tactics on every available occasion whoever they are. I see my responsibilities very clearly to the Irish people and to the Irish children. No vested interest group whoever they may be, at

> whatever level, will sabotage what every reasonable-minded man considers to be a just scheme….. Christian charity how are you.

Conclusion

O'Malley's decision in September 1966 to introduce free post-primary education together with a country-wide transport scheme was a game changer, and while it did not remove all the inequalities in education, it made a very significant difference to participation at all levels of Irish education. While O'Malley's predecessors, Hillery and Colley, had each played an important part in expanding the educational horizons of Ireland's young people, O'Malley's appointment as Minister for Education came at a crucial time, when political and public opinion was ready for a "big bang" approach. The statistics and the analysis carried out by the Investment in Education team had provided crucial evidence on the need for expanding post-primary provision. The Location Analysis in the Annexes and Appendices on the Investment in Education report provided a template and a development plan for a nationwide system of post primary education, accessible to all. By summer 1966, the work which underpinned the county reports had already been done and the timing of O'Malley's appointment as Minister for Education in July 1966 could not have come at a better time. O'Malley proved himself willing and able to ride roughshod over the innate caution of some of the senior civil servants and to over-rule their advice that free second level education should await the raising of the schools leaving age to 15 – then planned for 1970.

Twenty years later, Sean O'Connor, who was initially of the view that free second level education should not be introduced until 1970, and that it should be limited to junior cycle pupils, wrote (O'Connor, 1986, p. 153):

> I now believe that events proved Donogh O'Malley to be right. Had free education been delayed until 1970, I believe that the scheme would have been employed only to students under fifteen, or at most to students following the Intermediate Certificate course, and that there would have

been no provision for students following the Leaving Certificate course. By 1970, Seán Lemass had left the government and without his help, no Minister for Education would have been able to overcome the resistance of the Minister for Finance and his Department.

Lessons for Today.

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