



NUI MAYNOOTH
NUI Mhúirne Mhúirne

MAYNOOTH EDUCATION FORUM REPORT

IRISH EDUCATION:
DIFFERING VIEWS,
DEVELOPING VISIONS

June 20th 2013 , NUI Maynooth

PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD



I am pleased to enclose the report of the inaugural Maynooth Education Forum, 'Irish Education: Differing Views, Developing Visions.

Students entering university now will work until 2060 and live until 2080. They will face questions and challenges and work and live in ways we can only begin to imagine. A graduate must be an analytic, reflective, critical and creative thinker, with specialist knowledge and skills, but also with the flexibility to understand different perspectives. It was therefore very encouraging to hear so much discussion at the Forum about education from the perspective of creating critical thinkers and socially conscientious citizens.

The aim of our Education Forum was to generate stimulating debate and we certainly had some thought-provoking input from speakers, panellists and delegates. I was particularly heartened to see such open dialogue from a diverse range of perspectives within education, with free-flowing discussion and opinion without sectoral interests or bias. To that end, I feel that the Forum achieved what it set out to do and was a great platform from which we will build.

I would like to thank all of our contributors who travelled from far and near and inputted significant preparation and thought into their presentations – all of which are now available to download from our website. While you can review the presentations at your leisure, this document provides a brief synopsis of some of the debate and discussion from the day.

This was the first in a series of events which will take place at Maynooth under the Education Forum banner and I look forward to welcoming you back in the future. Once again, thank you for your contributions to what was a hugely worthwhile day.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Nolan'.

Professor Philip Nolan
President, NUI Maynooth

WHAT IS AN EDUCATED PERSON?

‘There is little room in this changed language of education for seeing education, not as a means to an end, but as a transforming of the persons themselves’

The first session of the day featured an inspiring presentation from Professor Richard Pring of Oxford University who argued that an educated school leaver must be measured by more than academic achievement and that education must instil a morality and a virtue of caring for others and society. He discussed education from the perspective of the formation of people and how it should not be viewed merely as a means for progression. Using a philosophical framework, he asked ‘what is an educated person’. In doing so, he questioned the broader benefits of education in terms of building capacity in individuals to ‘follow the good life’, and instil the ‘virtue of caring’ which should be central to our schools and colleges. He argued that education should embody the skills of understanding what makes us human, how do we become so, and how to become more so. That is; an educated person will have a sense of direction in life, not necessarily requiring high scores or certificates. Moving away from placing all the emphasis on educational institutions, Professor Pring argued that to achieve such vision requires partnership with society.

It was argued that teachers and educators play a central role in the relationship between the school, the educational institution, the community and wider society. He also warned of a system that was too reliant on performance management in terms of students and institutions.

Invited panellists Dr Jim Crowther, University of Edinburgh; Dr Kevin Marshall, Microsoft Ireland; and Aengus Ó Maoláin, European Students Union had the opportunity to reflect on the wider theme of ‘what is an educated person’, and to comment and respond to the presentation from Professor Richard Pring. These insights provided the following broader, sometimes contrasting ideas:

- Education as a concept is contested, and often dominated by a narrow instrumentalist agenda.
- There is a difference between learning and skills.
- Education is a life-long pursuit, so one may be ‘highly educated’ but not necessarily ‘an educated person’.
- Education needs to recognise the critical intellect and the education of educators needs to be attended to consistently.
- Education cannot compensate for society, but equality is a basic principal and education is critical to break out of poverty/disadvantage and to reduce inequality.

Following the insightful contributions from panellists, there were some interesting perspectives from the delegates.

Some views from the floor...

Education does not end – there is no educated person - being an educated person needs to be regarded as a lifelong process and education should be characterised by capacity for curiosity, ability to evaluate and judge information and the ability to use information. Life guidance is an integral part of achieving the educated person.

The principals guiding education systems should be less linear so that the process of education does not engender comparison and hierarchy.

The need to empower teachers to tailor their teaching to the students’ needs is paramount. An emphasis should be placed on teacher education, peer groups, flexibility in the curriculum and an element of professional discretion.

Education needs to be competitive and caring. We need an atmosphere where all students can achieve their potential.

There is a false dichotomy between learning in theory and learning in practice. Equally there is a distinction between education and educators.

To what extent is such a concern with ethics translated into reality, and are such concerns equally articulated across all education sectors?

IS HIGHER EDUCATION EDUCATING?

Keynote speaker for this session and one of the United States leading educationalists, Professor Richard Arum from New York University provided a fascinating insight into the state of undergraduate education in the U.S. and how graduates are faring after college. In doing so, he raised serious questions about the quality of the academic and social experiences of college students. The research conducted with Josipa Roska pointed to a decline in student academic commitment since the 1960s. Their research also provided little evidence of learning gains in terms of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills for a large number of students. Professor Arum argued that we need to be increasing the expectations that we have for our students and assess them realistically – and also in terms of critical thinking. He also proposed that we need to get the incentives right for both students and institutions. In doing so, he refocused attention on higher education's fundamental goals, and the role of assessment for learning in improving undergraduate learning.

The session presented some questions for higher education in Ireland – how do conditions of higher education differ in Ireland from the U.S.? And can we really argue that the situation is different here if we don't actually know? Should higher education institutions in Ireland be renewing their emphases on learning?

David Begg, ICTU; Fiona Hartley, Solas; Professor Ann Ryan, NUI Maynooth; and Professor Maria Slowey, DCU provided their reflective feedback. As before, these insights provided the following broader, sometimes contrasting ideas:

- Higher education has always been and continues to be a contested space.
- There is a need to strengthen the evidence base at institutional and system level.
- The emphasis on higher education in itself is too narrow and there continues to be little emphasis on the wider landscape including the further education sector.
- The development of generic skills in learners is key to anticipating the future needs of the labour market.
- Inequity in higher education continues to be a feature.
- Are the current generation of students key players in civic society?

Some views from the floor...

Irish education could be moving in the same direction as the U.S. in terms of areas such as reducing resources for teaching and learning and increasing inequalities across higher education in terms of funding.

We should be striving towards evidence based discourse, and subsequently organise discussion around that. We have an ethical responsibility to assess, evaluate and measure issues around further and higher education, as well as across the education sectors. Higher education investment in its own R&D is low.

We have still a lot to learn about higher education in Ireland before such a study should be undertaken in the Irish context. Almost nothing is known in the public or academic domain about the transfer from further education to higher education. Further education always gets left out of these discussions. We need to view the full landscape of 'post compulsory education'.

Instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) are not as robust as one would hope when conducting such a landmark study of students and education.

SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

In the afternoon, after the featured poster session, Professor John Coolahan chaired the final session of the day and brought a discussion on the future of primary and secondary education in Ireland with contributions from:

- Sean O'Foghlú, Department of Education and Skills - improving learning outcomes
- Sheila Nunan (INTO) – enhanced pre-school education
- David Istance (OECD) – teacher collaboration
- Padraig Hogan, NUI Maynooth – moving beyond education as transmission

The presenters focused on Early Childhood Education, Primary and the Post-Primary sectors in this session. The speakers raised the following issues:

- There is a tradition of consultation and dialogue in education policy making and we need to think about the system and the structures as education moves forward. This involves building shared debates among educational partners.
- There is an ongoing challenge to providing fulfilling and developmental educational experiences. The focus should be on the quality of what is actually experienced by learners. Themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communications, exploring and thinking have been developed at earlier stages of education. Our curriculum needs to change from the focus on defined skills to develop more complex skills such as critical thinking, collaboration.
- Teachers need to work together in evaluation and to work actively through networks both locally, nationally and internationally.
- There are no quick fixes or silver bullets in education, and there is a need to have sustained development and commitment to change.

Some views from the floor...

There are fundamental issues with school leavers coming into third level that cannot think critically or articulate themselves, and third level doesn't add to it - it's a systemic challenge.

We need collaborative rather than top-down policy-making – we don't just need consultation but also for policy makers to listen and act on what is said. There is a link between dialogue and successful collaboration - his needs to be continually encouraged.

We have a moral responsibility to prioritise assessment and do it correctly. Assessment should drive improvement in teaching and learning and in outcomes.

There may be a need to drive towards competency based examinations but the challenge is to transform existing paradigms in society and education.

Critical thinking and communicating effectively are needed for life, work and education

Education is transformative

Students should develop intellectual skills, have genuine understanding of subjects and develop values, ethics, interpersonal skills

We need to empower teachers

Irresponsible to rely on a single test for assessment

We must develop an atmosphere where all students can develop their potential

Education must go beyond transmission



NUI MAYNOOTH
OIBScoil na hÉireann Mú Níosa