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## The Politics of Educational Reform

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### Introduction

As President of the European School Heads Association, I frequently attended conferences where I was questioned about Ireland's education system. I explained that of the cohort of students that start off in our schools aged four, 90% of them are still in the system aged 18 (DES 2017a). This is an unusually high retention rate in many of the 40+ national associations that represent second level school leaders in over 30 countries throughout Europe. When I explained that nearly 70% of that 90% go on to some form of third level education you could see colleagues nod in admiration at an effective education system. You could understand their surprise then when I went on to explain that in Ireland a good education is synonymous with good exam results (not mutually exclusive I'll admit) but good exam results are often the result of a skewed education system where teaching-to-the-test is valued rather than the more

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rounded education to which we all aspire. Immigrants who have been drawn to Ireland since the economic boom of the 1990s bring the richness of cultural diversity and a longing for education which, when matched with the traditional value Irish society has for education, create the conditions to make Ireland an educational powerhouse for generations to come. However, the current perception of a good teacher is one who can reduce course content to a minimum, suggest exam questions to be learned off by heart and reproduced. In Irish secondary education students stand or fall based on how they perform in a single terminal exam. Talented students are not best served by this approach. Education is not a political football in Ireland. Here, the phrase ‘things have always been thus’ can readily be applied. There is a national consensus that our education system is good so, as a society, we have been reluctant to change a system which appears to be ‘not broken’.

Most children start school aged 4 and enter second level at around 12 years of age. There has been a significant increase in the numbers attending primary school in recent years and this bulge will continue working its way through the post-primary system until 2024–2025 (Central Statistics Office [n.d.-a](#) [online\_a]). State policy emphasises inclusion at both levels and this has led to a situation where almost 20% of education investment is in the Special Education Needs (SEN) sector. Austerity measures and cutbacks were the order of the day when Ruairi Quinn was appointed as Minister for Education and Skills in 2011. His predecessors, Mary Coughlan and Batt O’Keefe had considered changes to junior cycle so reform was already on the agenda by the time Minister Quinn came into office. A former Minister for Finance, Minister Quinn realised that reforms to our education system were necessary to meet the needs of the economy and in October 2012 he announced that the current Junior Certificate programme would be phased out and that the existing terminal examinations system would be replaced by a school-based model of continuous assessment.

## Pressures Prompting Reform

On the basis of the ‘if it’s not broken don’t fix it’ attitude, there is no doubt that our complacency as a nation was jolted in 2009 by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings that showed a drop of 12 places in literacy performance. The PISA study gauges the learning outcome of students aged 15 in mathematical, scientific and reading literacy. The foremost aim in PISA is to gauge students’ knowledge and competencies in contexts as close to real-life situations as possible. The consternation caused by the drop of 12 places in Ireland’s literacy performance was palpable. With the country in recession, the results were viewed as a national calamity. The Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Education and Skills Mary Coughlan officially commenced discussion on junior cycle developments in April 2010. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) had previously carried out research over several years on the experiences of students in junior cycle (Smyth et al. 2007). Key points of concern which emerged from the research included:

- inadequate time for engagement with deeper learning
- the dominating effect of the Junior Certificate examination on teaching and learning practice
- the perception of an inflexible and overcrowded curriculum
- the disengagement of many students at an early stage of junior cycle
- the narrow range of assessment activity
- limited access to a single qualification.

In addition, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) engaged in extensive discussions with interested groups in the hope of agreeing a new junior cycle which would see:

- schools having a greater freedom to design their own junior cycle programme
- movement away from the Junior Certificate being the sole method of qualification from the junior cycle to the introduction of a qualification which could relate to several forms of learning

- a junior cycle with flexible boundaries between 6th class and senior cycle
- learners having a greater role in their learning with more emphasis on student reflection, cooperative learning and self-directed learning
- schools having a wider choice as to how they can generate and use evidence of their students' learning
- schools having an increased role as curriculum developers and as designers of their own junior cycle programme according to the needs of their learners.

The PISA results matter in the boardrooms of multi-national businesses where key investment decisions are made. Unfortunately, the stand out headlines only refer to national rankings and should the news be good there can be complacency, should the news be grim, the headlines will make adverse comments on the quality of an education system and of those working in it. On foot of the PISA results Minister Quinn decided the time for action had come and announced changes to the Junior Certificate. His announcement was controversial and unexpected. The teacher unions believed that the speed with which the NCCA's advice was to be adopted and implemented as policy was unhelpful and they called for further discussions. However, the Minister was not for turning and a period of protracted industrial unrest began in schools. During an address in October 2012 to the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) National Executive, I gave the following comment endorsing Minister Quinn's proposal to reform the Junior Certificate:

We need joined up thinking between the primary and second level. The move to reform the Junior Cert can't come soon enough. We also need to stop using the Leaving Cert as a filter for third level because what happens at Leaving Cert governs everything else that's taught down the line. High performing systems allow schools to design curricula and assessment policies. We need to trust our schools, our school leaders and our teachers more and stop harping on about how great we are. The way the country is now—average isn't good enough. (Byrne 2012)

## Stakeholder Involvement

Key players needed to be kept onside to enable the reforms to succeed. Among these were the school leaders, teacher unions, the parents, the management bodies and the school students and the following sections detail the reactions and involvement of these key stakeholders as the reforms moved along.

### School Leaders

School leaders are vital to the successful implementation of any initiatives. By and large, principals were in favour of any reform which would enable them to be responsible for the educational outcomes of their students. Finding time to be the leader of learning eluded many due to being bogged down in paperwork and other administrative tasks. In response, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) sanctioned the creation of additional in-school management posts to ease this burden. These included the appointment of new deputy principals and middle leadership posts.

### Teachers

The teacher unions have served Irish education well. Despite the current teacher shortage, teaching is a well-regarded profession with good social status and pay scales that compare well internationally (OECD 2018). However, as a key player in the context of education reform, as the recession hit and severe cuts were implemented on salaries across the public sector, industrial relations in the education sector became tetchy and downright hostile when it came to curricular reform. This made the task of implementing the junior cycle reforms very difficult and led to ongoing industrial action by the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) which adversely affected the school climate in the majority of schools. Teachers employed in schools run by Education and Training Boards (ETB) were not directly involved in the industrial action as these

teachers were represented by a different union, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), which adopted a more positive view of the reforms. At the heart of the dispute was the unwillingness of ASTI members to assess their own students for the purposes of state exams. They saw themselves as advocates for the student rather than judges and refused to mark their own students' work for state examination purposes. Teachers are an enormous asset in Irish education but their refusal to make professional judgments when assessing students is unusual when compared to other countries where, as professionals, teachers are quite willing to make and stand over their assessments of the standards reached by their students (see Chap. 11 in this volume for an international comparison). Opposition to junior cycle reforms acted as a focal point for teacher anger and resentment over several years. In 2017, the DES asked schools to ensure that teachers were granted 22 hours non-teaching time annually, within their existing contracted hours, to undertake professional collaborative activities with colleagues, designed to support teaching and learning on the revised junior cycle (DES 2017b).

## Parents

The parent voice is represented by two organisations in Irish education, the National Parents Council Primary (NPC) and the National Parents Council Post-primary (NPCpp). Both groups are represented under legislation on key agencies such as the NCCA and the Teaching Council of Ireland. Junior cycle reforms was a post-primary initiative, and while the NPCpp, by its sectoral and fragmented nature, might not be as effective or as representative as its primary counterpart, it was forceful in favour of the proposed reforms. In the initial stages of the reform process, some parents throughout the country supported the ASTI position that teachers should not be involved in the assessment of their own students. There was dissension in the ranks, but in general, the vocal support of NPCpp officers was a key factor in Minister Quinn seeking to progress his reforms.

## Students

As highlighted in Chap. 3 in this volume, student voice has emerged as a key dynamic in the educational debate. The Irish Second-level Student Union (ISSU) although a fledgling organisation came out strongly in support of the proposed junior cycle reforms and were to the fore in advocating a move away from the rigid exam-based structure most were used to. As the group most likely to be affected by the changes, their voice was a powerful antidote to the strong opposition expressed by many ASTI members seeking to challenge the reforms.

## A Fragmented Second Level System

The junior cycle reforms were planned nationally and intended to be implemented in a secondary school system that is itself not uniform in terms of ownership or management. The managerial ownership (in Irish terms, *patronage*) of Irish schools is fragmented, with each second level school operating under the aegis of a Patron Body. The largest such group is the Voluntary Secondary Sector under the control of the Churches and religious Trust Bodies. The second largest operates under the control of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which control vocational schools and community colleges. The Community and Comprehensive Sector is the smallest of the Patron Bodies. Of the 722 second-level schools, 378 are in the Voluntary Secondary Sector, 248 are in the Education and Training Board sector and 96 in the Community and Comprehensive Sector (DES 2019). In Ireland, the state pays for education but does not control the schools. Each school is controlled by a Board of Management, and as a result, the second level system is driven by competition between schools rather than by schools collaborating. Grants to schools to pay the costs of student enrolment and staffing allocations to schools are linked to student numbers so schools always compete for students to the detriment of positive collaboration between them.

Early in the reform implementation phase, the ETB sector was less affected by industrial unrest. This sector benefited from the more pragmatic view of what was best as held by the TUI whose members were

mostly teaching in the ETB schools. These teachers were permitted to attend courses by the new Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT) professional development agency which meant that the reforms were embedded earlier and more effectively than in the other sectors. The management bodies played an important role in the roll-out of the reforms in that they were involved at every stage of the industrial relations talks with the teacher unions. The NAPD does not have an industrial relations remit and was consulted but not included in discussions with the unions. This area became more blurred as the opposition to the reforms continued until a *modus vivendi* emerged. This enabled the NAPD to participate fully in discussions with the DES and the management bodies but not attend meetings with the unions, thus enabling progress to be made. The following section explores additional efforts by the NAPD to support junior cycle reforms.

## Supporting Education Reform

To frame the national debate on education, the NAPD hosted a symposium entitled ‘Good Policies produce Better Schools’ in 2011. Eamon Stack, former Chief Inspector, presented on the ‘lessons of high performing education systems’ based on the work of Fenton Whelan from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Barber and Mourshed 2007). He listed Whelan’s seven priorities and emphasised the need for strategic thinking and planning. Whelan called for fewer but better teachers, attracting higher calibre applicants to become teachers, effective leadership in every school, proof that high standards are achieved, empower teachers to be accountable and collaborative, build teachers’ professional knowledge and challenge inequity in pupils’ outcomes. In his presentation, Professor Tom Collins, then Interim President of Maynooth University, spoke of ‘A way forward for Ireland? Or the Future and Education’. He questioned whether schools, as they are, are fit for purpose, querying assumptions sometimes made. These assumptions include the following: knowledge is beyond the power of students and none of their business; recall is the highest form of achievement; authority is to be trusted more than independent



judgement; one's own ideas are inconsequential; there are single unambiguous answers to every question; and passive acceptance supersedes active criticism. Collins viewed *creative cultures* as the way forward. He maintained that Ireland lacks an effective model of innovation and that social networks are needed because minds, not databases, are the creators of knowledge. He finished by saying:

if we go after the junior cycle with the actual focus on saying let us create experiences, students can create their own learning in new ways, rather than under the direction of their teachers, in interaction with the community inside the school and outside then we really are beginning to challenge the syllabus and curriculum of the future. (Collins 2011)

Teachers were forbidden by an ASTI directive from participating in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) organised to further the roll-out of the junior cycle initiative. The NAPD decided to establish a Leading 4 Learning Work Group to explore and develop the many strands of the junior cycle initiative. The essential Leading 4 Learning message is outlined below.

- Our core purpose as leaders is to ensure the highest possible standard of learning in all our classrooms.
- Leaders need to initiate and sustain a dialogue about learning in our schools.
- Concrete things can be done to promote teaching and learning dialogues in each school.
- Leaders need to place learning to learn on the school's agenda.
- Leaders must embrace the new Junior Certificate as a once in a lifetime opportunity for reform.
- Now is the hour to ensure that learning is enjoyable.
- Making change is just not simple.

Professor Guy Claxton from Winchester University became a key ally in the Leading 4 Learning network. His focus on embedding the development of lifelong learning dispositions in the culture of schools (e.g.

Claxton 2008) resonated with the work of the NAPD. He identified several related key phrases in the junior cycle documentation, as follows:

- being flexible,
- being positive about learning,
- knowing when and how to make use of your imagination,
- exploring options,
- taking the right kind of risks,
- being adventurous in your attitude to learning,
- being good at learning with and from others in all kinds of different ways,
- being curious,
- being proactive about your learning,
- being able to be your own first marker and
- to reflect on and evaluate learning for yourselves.

He reminded listeners that it is the detail of teaching that makes all the difference. He quoted Dylan Wiliam, speaking at the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) national conference in 2009, who summarised the significance of the classroom experience: 'An effective school is a school full of effective classrooms. It matters much less which school a child attends than which classroom they are in in that school. In England there is a fourfold difference between the most effective and least effective classrooms'.

Seminars were organised throughout Ireland by Paul Ginnis Rest in Peace (RIP), Graham Powell and Mike Hughes. The Powell workshops on 'Building the Learning Powered School' and Hughes workshops using the 'Magenta Principles' learning methodologies were taking place as the junior cycle reforms were being implemented in schools. Seminars were offered to a member of the senior leadership teams in schools accompanied by three or four colleagues. However, due to the negative industrial relations climate at the time junior cycle reforms per se was not mentioned at the sessions. The workshops were extremely practical and interactive, and the idea was to encourage teacher professional development by engaging in professional dialogue. Hundreds of NAPD member

schools participated in these workshops which helped change teaching and learning methodologies as well as spreading the word in individual schools.

## Implications for Educational Leadership

Evidence used to support the case for junior cycle reforms (e.g. Smyth et al. 2007) suggested that the curriculum, assessment and associated teaching approaches promoted teaching-to-the-test, rote learning, memorisation and competition within and between schools and, of course, league tables. A reformed Junior Certificate was intended to encourage teacher-supported self-directed learning as well as innovation, experimentation, self-discovery and collaboration within and between schools. The role of the teacher would fundamentally change to become a facilitator of student learning. Classrooms would have less teaching and more learning. The big challenge for Principals was to convince teachers, parents and students of the need for change and to enable teachers engage with the new pedagogy and how it will change classroom practices and improve the nature and quality of learning. In addition, since Ireland has little history of inter-school collaboration—mainly due to local competition for student enrolment—developing collaboration between and within schools is both a challenge and an opportunity. The Junior Certificate will now make learning the activity of the learner who will be active in constructing sense from the classroom environment and not passively receiving it. Teachers will be encouraged to collaborate with learners about the sequence of topics in the curriculum and to collaborate with learners on how they learn most effectively. The current system, oriented towards scores, grades and exam results, reinforces the idea that ability leads to success and is about *proving* competence which leads to assessment *of* learning. What is needed now is for the Junior Certificate to *improve* competence, to instil assessment *for* learning. The ‘new’ Junior Certificate is oriented towards learning and has at its heart a belief that effort leads to success.

It is important that, before embarking on further system-wide reform at senior cycle, parents and educators are assured that the reforms proposed in junior cycle work. The system can afford to be imaginative in the

reforms, provided school leaders are adequately resourced to deliver the new model. The Junior Certificate is no longer a terminal exam because about nine out of ten children who start school stay there to complete the Leaving Certificate. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute (Smyth et al. 2004) found that many students in their first year of secondary school make little or no progress in reading and maths. In the second year, many become disengaged and some of them rarely reconnect with school. Reform of the junior cycle curriculum, along with associated changes in teaching approaches, should address such matters. As things change, it is important to be mindful of what is working within the system. Ireland has talented teachers and school leaders who care about the students and who have demonstrated creativity and innovation in straightened economic times. The 'old' junior cycle restricts teachers' professional autonomy, judgement, creativity and passion with packed prescribed curricula. The 'new' junior cycle will allow schools to develop their own programmes and make the best use of the passion and creativity of staff. Principals must be helped to understand, and in turn help teachers, students and parents understand, why Junior Certificate reform must be prioritised. Such a reform is deliverable, provided it is supported by adequate resources. The integrity of the education system must be upheld, and standards not dumbed down. By trusting teachers and challenging pre-conceptions, Ireland can aspire to a second level system that is responsive to societal needs and stands on its own educational merits.

At one level, it seems that the junior cycle debate was reduced to a row over assessment. However, at the heart of the reform is the devolution of greater autonomy to schools to develop and resource a curriculum which meets the students' needs. Minister Quinn's original intention was that schools would have the autonomy to decide which eight subjects a student would offer for assessment by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the remaining time on the timetable would be made up by students selecting up to four short courses in areas such as Coding, Philosophy, Chinese or other areas depending on the context of the school or the expertise of the teachers locally. Such a decision, if implemented, would have forced schools to offer more radical timetables with wider choice to students but the subsequent decision made by the Minister to allow up to ten subjects for assessment meant that many

schools continued with the status quo and the opportunity for a more radical change to school timetables was lost. The decision to phase in subjects, starting with English in September 2014 rather than introduce several subjects simultaneously was a lost opportunity. Teachers of English felt exposed in that theirs was the only subject to be introduced and many were precluded by their union from taking part in CPD and preparation. Had three or four subjects been introduced at the same time, teachers of one subject area would not have felt as exposed as teachers of English did, and an important opportunity to encourage collaboration and professional dialogue between colleagues could have been secured.

Ministers changed, time moved on, other subjects were launched, and the union embargo was lifted. This meant that the tone of the conversation changed and the potential benefits of new teaching and learning opportunities came more to the fore. To help embed different modes of assessment classroom-based assessments (CBAs) were introduced, accompanied by Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings. The DES granted 22 hours professional time to teachers annually in the hope that local contexts and good relations would enable the successful transition to CBA and SLAR meetings becoming the norm. Unfortunately, some industrial relations issues again arose with the result that this is not the case in all schools. Whereas the Assessment Task associated with the second CBA is only worth 10% of total marks, some school leaders report that CBAs have taken on a disproportionate weight and a status of their own. Amongst students and their parents, anxiety levels are raised to those typically experienced by students taking the Leaving Certificate. This is an unintended negative consequence that seems to be more of an issue in schools that have retained Christmas and summer exams when the intention was that classroom-based assessments would replace these in-house tests. In time the advantages of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) which will include all subjects examined by the SEC, learning from short courses and CBAs as well other areas of student involvement will be recognised.

## Lessons for Senior Cycle Reform

Participation in PISA generates an enormous amount of data that can inform policy and educational priorities for policy makers and other educational leaders. However, the rich data contained in the PISA studies are often reduced to crude league tables about how well or how poorly individual countries have performed. School leaders, such as the NAPD and other management associations, must lobby politicians to see education as an investment, not as a cost. Education needs careful nurturing, adequate resourcing and trust in our teachers for our investment in the next generation to pay off.

As reform of the junior cycle takes hold, the time is right to consider how best to reform senior cycle (upper secondary education). To avoid the disharmony generated by the introduction of the junior cycle reforms, the NCCA is undertaking a rigorous consultation to review the senior cycle. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) undertook extensive research to analyse the opinions of teachers, parents and students in 41 representative schools selected to be involved (Smyth et al. 2018). Preliminary findings suggested that:

- students were not taking ownership of their learning;
- the current exam is weighted towards the academically minded;
- broader skills are neglected; there is a need to prepare students for the digital age;
- handwritten exams are incongruous with the digital agenda in society;
- there is a perceived gap between junior and senior cycle;
- issues of validity, reliability and anonymity are not the same as fairness.

There is a significant challenge in pursuing the wider purposes of the Leaving Certificate given the widespread use of student results as a selection mechanism for third level. There is also a desire to reduce the emphasis on assessment during the final three weeks of senior cycle. It was clear from the ESRI findings that future developments at senior cycle need to ensure continuity with the junior cycle and with developments in further education, apprenticeships and traineeships. Given the challenges in

encouraging schools to take greater responsibility for curricula at junior cycle, it is interesting that the question of compulsory subjects, subject choice and pathways using the Leaving Certificate Applied and Vocational emerged as areas to be considered in the senior cycle review.

What should a well-educated 18-year old look like was a question posed at a recent NAPD symposium as Ireland continues a national debate about how well the education system caters for all students. Ireland has changed over the last decade. Recent census statistics indicate that 12% of the population comes from a non-Irish background (CSO Online\_b). Students in Irish schools are drawn from 200 countries reflecting tremendous linguistic diversity. Thirteen per cent of the students have some form of disability and 20% experience deprivation. The education system should cater for all and provide happy, fulfilled and challenged students who can think for themselves. There must be equality of opportunity and equity in the system. Educators need to make the senior cycle more suitable to meet the needs of a significant cohort of students not suited to the type of academic curriculum on offer in the current Leaving Certificate. At the NAPD Symposium 2018, the National Parents' Council (Primary) reported on a survey issued to over 4000 parents. The questionnaire related to the aspirations the parents had for their children into the future. Over 66% of parents remarked that they would like to see changes to the type of senior cycle on offer in Irish schools. They want their children to get good results but most of all they wanted their children to be happy, to develop good social skills and know about the world they live in. When asked what they believed were the qualities needed to be a well-educated 18-year-old, parents listed independence, confidence, creativity, ambition, leadership, curiosity, courage, compassion, honesty, justice, empathy, tolerance, respect for themselves and respect for others. Among the skills parents believe are needed for their primary children are strong computer and digital skills, a high level of literacy and numeracy, to be a critical and creative thinker, to have practical skills, to have good knowledge about their personal wellbeing and to have good social skills. The responses of the primary parents surveyed show that change is needed to what transacts in the classroom at second level.

While the senior cycle review consultation is in progress, the NCCA has been moving to make the senior cycle more relevant over the last number of years with updated syllabi in subjects like Agricultural Science, Applied Mathematics and Art and Economics. The recent introduction of Politics and Society, Computer Science and Physical Education shows that the Leaving Certificate programme is trying to change with the times. The revision of subjects involved will benefit students but will also require extensive professional development for the teachers involved.

## Summary

The proposal to phase out the current Junior Certificate started a debate on the vision Irish society has for its education system and the values that should be promoted. Ireland values education. The passionate involvement of six Ministers for Education from three different political parties and all stakeholders, but particularly the parents and the students, influenced policy makers and caused deep reflection on the best way forward. State exams were regarded as ‘hard but fair’ and a rite of passage to be experienced but there is now a realisation that performance in a single terminal exam may not be the best way to promote and assess learning.

This chapter has detailed the pressures and influences which were catalysts for junior cycle reforms including the role played by PISA rankings, various Ministers of Education and the NCCA. It has detailed how key stakeholders such as school leaders, the NAPD, teachers and parents were involved in the context of a fragmented system in which the reform agenda was the subject of contestation involving the main teacher union (the ASTI) primarily due to disagreements regarding the role of the teacher in the assessment of students’ work for state certification. Over time, the tenor of these discussions has changed and there has been a more general acceptance of the benefits of the proposed reforms although these have not been implemented to the extent envisaged initially. The implementation of CBAs is one concrete example of the enactment of the reforms and approaches such as interviews, continuous assessment, presentations and projects will generate a portfolio of achievement to better reflect the student’s potential over the course of the junior cycle.



With junior cycle reforms now at the end stage of initial implementation, thoughts have turned to reform at senior cycle with some general acceptance that using the Leaving Certificate as a filter for university entry is not serving the educational interests of young people in a vibrant and developing Ireland. The experience at junior cycle has demonstrated that reform is not easy and at the heart of any curriculum reform must be a belief that learning is fun and that effort leads to success. Schools should be facilitated to develop their own programmes and make best use of the passion and creativity of staff to suit each school's context. We are lucky to live in a society which values education. As Professor Philip Nolan, President of Maynooth University said at the NCCA senior cycle seminar in November 2018 in Dublin, 'we should look on education with an openness to wonder and joy'. In all this, we must ensure that the integrity of the system is upheld, and standards are maintained. The reform boat has sailed far enough from the shore so that changes brought about to date cannot be undone. Ireland can aspire to a second level system that is responsive to societal needs and stands on its own educational merits.

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