

## **As change leaders, principles must challenge prejudice and promote further education opportunities**

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### ***Student choices after the Leaving Certificate***

As the 2022 Leaving Certificate has concluded and students, in various states of anxiety, await their results it is worth reflecting on the avenues for education, training and careers that are open to these mostly young graduates from second level education and how their choices are influenced (even determined) by their school, culture and peer pressure. The choices they make will impact on them for the rest of their lives. But their choices will also impact on Ireland's social and economic development.

We know that over 66% of students will choose to enter higher education – approximately 55% of whom will attend the seven traditional universities and approximately 45% will attend the technological universities/institutes of technology – giving Ireland one of the highest higher education participation rates in the EU. We know that a lesser number will access further education courses and a small minority will go directly into employment or remain unemployed and not in education or training. The fact that the latter group is such a small proportion of school leavers and that school completion is around 90% of the cohort, is among the successes of our education system and grounds for celebration of the achievement of school leaders, teachers, counsellors and policy makers.

### ***A balanced FET and HE sector for better social and economic outcomes***

But in its success lies the prospect that our education system is failing many students and our society - particularly when we look at higher education (HE) and further education and training (FET) and the balance between, and outcomes from, these sectors.

A successful modern society and economy needs a wide range of skills and competences in its population. Key to achieving this for Ireland lies in creating a better balance between FET and HE. With such a high participation rate, it is clear that Irish people have embraced higher education with gusto, bringing benefits for graduates and for our society and economy. But our love affair with higher education comes at the expense of recognising the enormous contribution that FET makes to Ireland and a sustainable society and economy. According to Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, while higher skills will constitute 41% of the skills mix required by 2030, almost 45% of jobs will require medium level skills such as those provided by FET Colleges. In addition, technological changes are breaking down the traditional divide between general/theoretical and vocational/practical learning. Apprenticeship programmes combine knowledge and skills in an increasingly higher skill world. There are clear dangers for individuals and society if we continue to overlook FET

and its role in widening educational opportunities and the acquisition of the key skills essential for achieving personal and career ambitions over one's lifetime.

### ***Schools play a pivotal role - but there are challenges ...***

When it comes to creating the kind of balanced post-secondary education system, schools play a pivotal role. However, they are faced with a number of challenges if they are to do their duty by their students.

One of the most difficult challenges is that, culturally, Irish people have a strong appetite for higher education while FET is very much seen as "second best". The same goes for many of the careers that the two sectors lead to. But the pandemic has forced us all to realise that the people we have depended upon to keep our businesses, hospitals and health care centres, and cities going were often those with FET qualifications.

The situation reflects the history of the two sectors - secondary schools with their academic orientation have been seen as superior to vocational schools which were too often regarded as for less-academically-able students and/or students from lower socio-economic groups. This is a deeply embedded prejudice and the present ownership, management and governance systems of the schools, as well as curriculum and resources, continue to reflect this.

### ***...and questions for school leadership to reflect on***

It is time to ask schools, and especially school principals: Do you challenge this prejudice enough, or at all? Do schools, as they should through their teaching and counselling, focus on the skills, competences and natural interests of their students and advise them and their parents on the best course for their future education and training, whether it be FET or HE?

While acknowledging the downsides of anecdotal evidence, there is a view that maximising direct progression to higher education and CAO points are the key targets for school leaderships. School principals, it is said, are more likely to discourage engagement with FET opportunities and FET providers in their community rather than promote them. Creating opportunities for their students to attend FET open days or distributing informational material to them on what FET has to offer is not done in a single-minded pursuit of CAO validation.

### ***Media and parental pressures***

In this schools are aided and abetted, even driven, by the excessive media (print and broadcast) focus on the Leaving Certificate and on school league tables. Section 53 of the Education Act (amended in 2015) set out to prevent just this outcome, but the ingenuity of journalists found a way around it by focusing on feeder schools. In doing so, they reflect what many – even most – of their readers and parents, and therefore newspaper proprietors, want. It has to be acknowledged that it would take a principal of considerable courage to stand above the crowd.

### ***HE is overvalued***

The outcome of these combined cultural and media pressures is a system that overvalues academic programmes and undervalues more vocationally oriented education and training programmes, especially in FET. At its worst, this is a betrayal of young people and their futures and a disservice to their community.

### ***The influence of the Leaving Certificate and public policy***

But schools are also at the mercy of national policy and especially the high stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate. Apart from the pressure it places on students and its tendency to perpetuate social and economic privilege, the Leaving Certificate also has a strong tendency towards narrowing the focus of students on to more academic programmes, encouraging rote learning and limiting the development of a broader range of skills. After a promising period during COVID it looked like there could be another way to assessment that more accurately identified the skills and competences of students and promoted their development. That brief flame of innovation appears to have been snuffed out by vested interests as this year's examinations returned to pre pandemic format.

Schools have a big part to play in seeing that FET becomes a central player in our education and training system, on equal terms with HE. But policy makers in government and its agencies are central to achieving this too. The creation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is a positive step. So too is the policy focus on creating pathways from FET to HE to avoid cul-de-sacs in the system. However, some recent decisions by the Minister, such as increasing the number of university places and well publicised announcements risks creating a perception that the real action lies in HE. And in comparison, with universities, FET colleges have historically received less funding and resources despite their obvious requirements.

The SOLAS strategy, *Future FET*, sets out a number of actions to bring FET centre stage with the laudable objective of making FET "loud and proud". They include addressing the lack of exposure of second-level students to FET with tasters of vocational courses. Transition Year apprenticeship tasters also present potential – but schools need to embrace these initiatives and engage with them proactively if they are to be effective. Given the centrality of the CAO as the major focal point for school leavers, it is essential that it does more than simply provide information – it must go further and give FET equal standing with HE. There is also an onus on SOLAS and FET Colleges to simplify the applications process.

### ***The responsibility of higher education institutions***

HE also has a responsibility to act. A national credit accumulation and transfer system would create opportunities for learners of all ages and ability to progress through tertiary education by building credits over time and carrying them from one programme, institution, or form of education and training, to another. Complementary to this, guided and navigable learning pathways would facilitate learner progression through tertiary programmes into work and back again. These initiatives would lessen the perception that making decisions on one's

education and training is a once in a life time event and emphasise the value of lifelong learning.

***Principals are leaders of change***

This article began with acknowledging the great contribution school principals and their staff have made to education in Ireland and to our success as a society and economy. The comments made later are done with the intention of prompting self-reflection on what more can be done by a cadre of people exercising a critical influence on the kind of society we create and who have proven capacity to change Ireland for the better.