***Towards a Truly Inclusive Education System***

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***Marginalized students- the successes and needs of the system***

*A sociological perspective*

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***Selection function of education***

Educational credentials are used to select people to a range of occupations in the labour market. The old form of this was a degree for a profession, secondary school completion for office and white-collar jobs for women and men and vocational school for trades and skilled work. Those who left early and without qualification were described as “unskilled” early “school leavers”. Research shows that in general your risks of unemployment and poverty in Ireland and elsewhere are very much related to your achieved educational success.

**Selection = Success or Failure; Winners or Losers**

This selection role makes the educational system both political and controversial. Selection via streaming within schools on achievement socializes people for their future lives. This works well for achievers but not for those who feel they are “failures”. There is always a ***tension in educational settings between the achievement requirement in the search for “excellence***” and possible negative psychological effects of it on student lives.

In our current “Knowledge” based society with its use of educational attainment in the allocation of high status jobs brings with it the risk that people in the lowest part of the income and educational range feel unsuccessful. We know the latter makes people unhappy, depressed and they suffer from low self-esteem. Doing a job that is respected makes people feel motivated, rewarded in esteem as well as money.

**Justice and Role of Public Policy**

A more philosophical and ethical role has gained some prominence in our evaluations of educational systems with a focus on justice and human dignity. Martha Nussbaum identified a number of central human ***functional capabilities*** that all citizens should have (Naussbaum: 1999:41)[[1]](#footnote-1). She lists *Life, Bodily Heath and Integrity; Bodily Integrity, Senses, Imagination Thought, Emotions, Practical reason, Affiliation, Other species, Play and Control over one’s environment.*

In the context of this paper *‘****Senses Imagination Thought’***are promoted through education in a broad way including mathematical, scientific, artistic, musical, religious and religious thought.Under *‘****Control over one’s environment’***she inserts *“political rights and participation and material control which includes having* ***the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others and at work being able to work as a human being****, exercising practical reason and entering meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers”.*

According to Nussbaun, **all** of us deserve to be educated or trained so that we have capacity to do a job and function in society[[2]](#footnote-2)

While government policy focuses on IT and STEM in the creation of employment, they unwisely neglect art, music, design as well as literature and the Humanities

**Changing labour markets and their effects on education**

 We have all noted big changes in the labour market: bank with no officials, supermarkets with nobody at the cash registers, clothes shops who tell you when looking for your size “that you will get it on line”.. Research on the UK Labour market shows an increase in professional and managerial jobs over time, a steep decline of “semi-skilled” jobs but a continuity of jobs in low skills and (see Schmuecker (2014) [[3]](#footnote-3). Similar patterns can be found in Ireland. The services sector is steadily growing here where some jobs are low skilled . Others in the personal care sector are classified as *low skill* but instead require *special skills*. These changes pose challenges for the educational system as the labour market becomes more polarized. How is Ireland adapting to this challenge?

***Irish Education is a success! WELL DONE……..***

In a recent comparative evaluation of UN Social Development Goals among fifteen EU countries Ireland was ranked overall as 11, but in relation to **Quality of** **Education it was ranked 3.** The total score is based on a combination of the (i) PISA score, (2) expected years of schooling , (3) level of tertiary education among and population aged (25-64) with tertiary education and (4) NEET (not in employment, education or training ) rate.

In Ireland, the overall retention rate -for the 2010 cohort- to leaving Certificate was 91%.[[4]](#footnote-4) According to OECD (2015) 52% of Irish 25-34 year olds had attained a tertiary education compared with the OECD average of 42%, overall levels of tertiary attainment for adults (aged 25-64) increased from 29% in 2005 to 43% in 2015, higher that OECD average of 27 to 35 in same period.

**Numbers in Third Level.**

In 2016-2017 there were 43,569 new entrants full time undergraduates 56% in Universities and the remainder in Institutes of Technology. 80% were full time students. New entrants were 52% female and 48% male. Overall, there were 225,628 enrolments, 80% full time, 17% part time and only 3% “remote”. There were 69,633 graduates (Higher Education 2016/17 Key Facts and Figures)

**How did we achieve such high levels in third level?**

The first reason is a high completion rate at upper second level. The second , reason is a reduction in number of formerly available permanent jobs open to students with “good leaving certs” such as banking, civil service and nursing. As the job opportunities for Leaving Certificate graduates declines students are pushed into third level and compete with each other for available jobs. [[5]](#footnote-5) Innovative policies by Ministers for Education- D. O Malley abolished fees for second level and Niamh Breathnach introduced free University fees in 1996. The EU through the European Social Fund provided funding for Regional Technical Colleges. A

The Central Applications Office also played a major role in providing information to parents and students on getting a place in third level. While initially Universities had their own points system, Christina Murphy (Irish Times) began to demystify them points and finally Universities adopted a unified common entry points system.

Universities themselves engage in massive advertising to attract high numbers of applicants. They invested investment in sports halls, restaurants and other facilities creating attractive student campuses. They also offer extracurricular activities which are attractive to students. State funding for Universities are linked to student numbers so colleges have increased the number of entrants to Arts and Humanities which are less costly to run. Female admissions are now equal or higher than male.

*So Entry to ‘Third level” has became the Normal expectation for most school leavers.* This continues to be promoted through the ***ranking of schools on the basis*** of the proportions of their leaving certificate students who get to third level. Inevitably this means that school status and teacher status are bound up with the number of students who get top points in Leaving certificate.

**Was third level an elite system?**

As participation in third level expanded the issue of equality and access became a prominent one. ‘Who Goes to College’ by Pat Clancy in UCD put the issue on the agenda. As third level colleges were getting public funds they had to address equal opportunities and widen access to all students. They did this by devising special “access routes” for special categories of students including mature students. Hence HEA (2016) reports that 20% of new entrants were from ‘target group of non-manual, semi and unskilled’. However, this demand to enter third level also resulted in the development of Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses in the vocational sector. Did this have an impact of the original aims of PLC courses?

**PLC courses offer an alternative pathways to third level**

PLC programmes (SOLAS/ESRI: 2018) have the objective of providing specific vocational skills to learners with programmes directly related to areas of labour market demand. New courses are only ratified if there is a “labour market justification’ for then. The recent evaluation of the PLC programme (SOLAS/ESRI: 2018) reveals that 40% of participants do a PLC course to get a place at third level, while 40% want to get a job and 20% do a course for their personal development. There was 32,544 PLC students in 2015-2016.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some of their course results or QQI/FET qualifications can be used to apply for a place on a related third level degree programme. Now , many third level colleges have a number of reserved places for students who successfully complete designated PLC courses. NUIG has increased the number of reserved places from such PLC from 60 to 170 places[[7]](#footnote-7). The Prospectus from GTI gives data on the progression of their students to third level degrees in UK and Ireland. So PLCs provide a viable alternative route to third level education for school leavers. (Report 2018; 9).

In addition the PLC sector provides a route back into education for adult learners and offers training opportunities for unemployed learners seeking a route back into employment. 51% of students were over age 21 (2011). Women form 61% of PLC enrolments. There are 2,500 named course in 60 subject areas many offering exciting new courses in soccer, music, film, etc . So they have different client groups.

**Early school leavers and unemployment levels**

*A Report on**Youth Unemployment in Ireland: the Forgotten Generation* [[8]](#footnote-8)(2010) drew attention to the limited number of training places available to unemployed young people in 2010-2011. It cited a TUI report of 3 applicants for every PLC place available.

 This report found that those who not want to go to third level but wanted to get a job were not happy with the opportunities available to them. Focus groups with unemployed young people (aged 18-25) found their failure to find a job reduced their well being, they were not optimistic about their future prospects *‘nor did they see any light at the end of the tunnel*”. They expected to have to emigrate and thought the Government “*would be glad to see the back of us*”. They cited their lack of any work experience as a barrier to their being offered employment, as it seemed to be a main lever in getting a job. One of the main proposals from that report was that a national traineeship programme should be set up. This seems to be now in train….

**Generation Apprenticeship**

It is now recognized that there has been a considerable decline in the traditional male apprenticeships. Ireland like many other European countries has neglected the skills sector. The EU is promoting apprenticeships as part of it Youth Guarantee scheme. Within this Plan Ireland has promised to increase apprenticeships to 31,000 between 2016 and 2020. 19,000 other traineeships are to be delivered during the same period.

In 2017, there were 12,000 apprenticeships with 4,900 employers, 4,700 of whom were registered in 2017. (Dept. of Education and Science). The Minister expects to increase the number of registered apprenticeships to 14,000 by 2020. Two new apprenticeships were recorded on EU report : insurance practice and industrial engineering . The Department website notes that are also new apprenticeships in healthcare, equine science and agriculture. Further apprenticeships will be validated in 2018. This initiative is long awaited.[[9]](#footnote-9).

Currently it seems as if each programme involves an employer or industrial sector and an Institute or University. These apprenticeships vary some running for 2 years and some for four and cover a different levels from level 6 to 10. Some will then be degree level. One includes a professional doctorate entitled Principal Engineer.

**Challenges to new apprenticeships**

The first barrier is that an applicant must be employed before he can register as an apprentice. The draft curriculum is job experience based predominantly -in effect a job for which the employer pays the apprentice a wage. Secondly, wages are specified and without training subsidies small employers in craft sections would be unable to afford and guarantee a four-year apprenticeship. Thirdly, large corporate companies currently are advertising for applicants who have a Leaving Certificate and will select by interview and aptitude tests. Both tend to be some biased. Fourthly , there is no central application system. Without the latter it is going to be hard to measure demand. Fifth, different regions will offer different apprenticeships. There is a campaign under way to promote the values of the apprenticeship model to both employers and prospective apprenticeships. So there is much to be done and important that the TUI is engaged with it.

**NEET s the most needy**

An **OECD (2016)** report showed that Ireland’s NEET rate increased sharply during the Recession. Between 2006 and 2011 the Irish NEET ((not in employment, education or training) rate more than doubled from 11% to 22%. This was driven by a rise in youth unemployment. 65% of youth who had dropped out of school before completing upper secondary school were NEET compared to just 13% of those with a third level degree.

**Youthreach.**

Youthreach is one of the State’s responses to early school leaving and is designed to offer a second chance to re-engage in education, participate in vocational training and acquire new skills. From a study of Youthreach I conducted myself I found that its main attraction was that students were not in a school environment and had a completely different relationship with the tutors and mentors. Given the small number of students who leave school early it is vital to retain some form of Youthreach type programmes for these most disadvantaged and ideally help them to follow on with vocational training.

An evaluation of Youthreach SEN (special education needs) model involved listening to the learner’s voice in a supported educational setting. It focused on learners’ emotional and social competences. The study ((Gordon NEPS) 2013 reported much better outcome across a range of learner outcomes when compared to other Youthreach projects. She argues that the SEN required extensive mentoring which is expensive. However such support at a teenage stage may offset later adult problems. One of the key messages that came from Youthreach research is that young people needed attention, time, respect and encouragement in addition to psychological supports. This is a prerequisite to their subsequent engagement in job skill training. Currently EU funding under the Youth Guarantee Scheme is funding some forms of training under INTREO under the Dept of Social Protection as part of a Labour Market Activation Scheme. I have not had time to review the evaluation data on these initiatives.

To conclude, it is important to realize that the promotion and development of the “central human functioning capabilities” of young school leavers and unemployed are crucial to prevent a direct pathway to long term adult unemployment and the dissolution and disadvantage that entails. This is why we need to find the best ways to ensure this happens.

We are fortunate that the EU is reviewing and helping to fund our developments in the area of youth unemployment. It is important that such pilot schemes are evaluated and best practices are mainstreamed. The TUI has an important contribution to make to programme planning.

To conclude – as educators you have accomplished much but as I have indicated there is much to be done and I hope that the government realize the huge contribution you all make to our high score and to making our society a more just one.

Thank you for your attention

Evelyn Mahon

1. Nussbaum, M Sex and Social Justice 1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A recent study of gender and work I did in Dublin reaffirmed the importance of employment and work in women’s lives. FLOWS-EU. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schmuecker, K. (2014) Future of the UK Labour market, Joseph Rowntree Foundation [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Voluntary Schools had highest rates to LC at 93%, followed by 91% for Community and Comprehensive and 88% for Vocational Schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As the number of graduates increases from University and graduates compete with each other for jobs, this had lead to an increase in postgraduate education such a taught Masters in specialist areas. Recent reports (C.L) suggested that we had too many graduates or more specifically too many in Arts and Humanities and that we needed more STEM graduates. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 95% in ETB sector and the remainder offered by voluntary secondary and community and comprehensive schools [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See [www.nuigalway.ie/access/qqifetac/](http://www.nuigalway.ie/access/qqifetac/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. O’Connor P, National Youth Council [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. GTI prospectus shows exciting Certificate courses in Digital media, Fitness, Soccer etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)