



By Joaquín Gogorza, *Growing Up Together/Creciendo Juntos*

National newspaper-reporting on state examinations: An historical exposition
of the exceptional case of the Irish Leaving Certificate

Publicación de los resultados de exámenes de estado en diarios nacionales:
una exposición histórica del caso excepcional del Certificado Irlandés de Salida
(título de educación secundaria)

Le reportage des journaux nationaux sur les examens de l'État: Un exposé
historique du cas exceptionnel du certificat de fin d'étude en Irlande

Tom O'Donoghue

University of Western Australia

Jim Gleeson

Australian Catholic University

Orla McCormack

University of Limerick

ABSTRACT

During a post-independence phase (1922-mid-sixties), Irish secondary schooling was characterised by low participation rates, elitism, and careerist perceptions of students. Phase two (1967-mid 1980s) saw participation rates expand dramatically as Ireland became more open and industrialised, and policymakers focused on relationships between education, human capital and economic development. During this phase, the Irish Times began to include careers and examinations information. With school completion rates continuing to increase from the mid-1980s (phase three), the two main daily newspapers realised that the growing need for information about access to an increasingly complex and highly-prized higher education system, which was dependent on academic achievement, afforded an opportunity to boost sales and advertising. In response, examinations' coverage reached a level recently described as 'exceptional by a team of researchers from the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast.

Keywords: Ireland, national newspapers, higher education, advertising, school completion rates, 20th Century

RESUMEN

Durante la fase posterior a la independencia (desde 1922 hasta mediados de los años sesenta), la educación secundaria irlandesa se caracterizó por bajos índices de participación, elitismo y por el arribismo con el que la concebían sus estudiantes. En la segunda fase (1967 a mediados de los ochenta) las tasas de participación aumentaron drásticamente a medida que Irlanda se volvió más abierta e industrializada y las autoridades centraron sus esfuerzos en la educación,

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el capital humano y el desarrollo económico. Durante esta fase, el Irish Times comenzó a publicar informaciones sobre carreras y exámenes. Con el continuado aumento de graduados de secundaria (tercera fase, desde mediados de los 80), los dos principales diarios irlandeses comprendieron que la creciente necesidad de información sobre el acceso a una educación superior cada vez más compleja, demandada y dependiente del rendimiento académico, era una oportunidad para impulsar las ventas y la publicidad. Así, la cobertura de los exámenes alcanzó un nivel recientemente descrito como "excepcional" por un equipo de investigadores del Centro de Evaluación Educativa de las Universidades de Oxford y Queen's de Belfast.

Palabras clave: Irlanda, diarios nacionales, educación superior, publicidad, tasas de titulación secundaria, siglo 20

RÉSUMÉ

Durant la phase post-indépendance en Irlande (1922-mi-soixantes), l'instruction secondaire est caractérisée par un faible taux d'inscriptions, et par l'élitisme et la perception carriériste des étudiants. La Phase 2 (1967-mi-1980) voit une expansion rapide d'inscriptions tandis que l'Irlande s'ouvre et s'industrialise davantage, et que les responsables des politiques misent sur la relation entre l'éducation, le capital humain et le développement économique. Durant cette phase, le Irish Times commence à inclure l'information au sujet des carrières et des examens. Dès la mi-1980 (phase trois) le nombre des étudiants terminant leur secondaire continue à grimper. Les deux principaux journaux quotidiens se rendent compte du besoin croissant d'information sur l'accès à un système d'éducation supérieure de plus en plus complexe et estimé qui repose sur la réussite académique. Répondre à ce besoin est pour ces quotidiens une occasion d'accroître leur vente et leur publicité. En réaction favorable, la publicité sur les examens atteint un niveau décrit comme 'exceptionnel' par une équipe de chercheurs de Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment et de Queen's University Belfast.

Mots-clés: l'Irlande, les journaux nationaux, l'éducation supérieure, la publicité, les taux de diplomation au secondaire, le vingtième siècle

Introduction

Fifty years ago, in 1967, one of the most significant events in the recent history of Irish education took place: the introduction of free education for attendance at second-level schools. Soon, provision of education at this level, which had previously been the preserve of a minority, was made to all. A great expansion in the provision of third-level education followed. Since then, much attention has been given to the generation of a corpus of scholarly work on various aspects of the nature and extent of the change brought about. One related area, however, that has not been the focus of sustained attention has been the role of the media, especially that of the national newspapers, in relation to the Leaving Certificate examination, which is taken by the great majority of second-level students at the end of their final year of schooling.

During a post-Independence phase (1922 – mid-1960s), Irish second-level schooling was characterised by low participation rates, elitism, and careerist perceptions of students. With the majority of those who left primary school up to 1967 not continuing their formal education, the national newspapers took little interest in the examinations taken by pupils enrolled in the second-level schools, with no market gain to be achieved. Phase two (1967-mid 1980s) saw participation rates expand dramatically as Ireland became more open and industrialised. During this phase, the national press began to include careers and examinations information. With school completion rates continuing to increase from the mid-1980s (phase three), the newspapers realised that the growing need for information about

access to higher education, which was dependent on academic achievement, afforded an opportunity to boost sales and advertising. In response, examinations' coverage reached a level recently described as 'exceptional' by a team of researchers from the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast (Baird et al., 2015).

While drawing on the available copious body of relevant academic literature in writing this paper, we were fortunate in also being able to avail ourselves of three accounts that allowed us to delineate broad trends in education reporting in Ireland since the early 1990s. The first consists of memories of John Horgan (2001), who pioneered educational journalism at the *Irish Times* in the early 1970s. The second account relates to the work of the late Christina Murphy, who was chief education reporter at the *Irish Times* from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s (Brown, 2015), and was very committed to providing information for parents not familiar with what was required to gain entry to third-level education institutions. The third account is based on an in-depth interview conducted in 2016 with John Walshe who, after qualifying as a secondary school teacher, became the first education reporter at the *Irish Independent* in 1970. Having worked there for 20 years, he moved to the *Irish Times* in 1990 before returning to the *Irish Independent* in 1993, and then taking up a position as chief education advisor to Minister Quinn from 2011 to 2014. Walshe responded to an earlier draft of the paper, including interpretation of his interview, and provided clarification of detail.

Setting the Scene

Since the introduction of free second-level education in Ireland in 1967, it has consisted of a compulsory three-year junior cycle and a non-compulsory two-year senior cycle. The majority at senior-cycle level study for and sit the Leaving Certificate examinations, with their subject choices being influenced very much by entry requirements set by the universities and other third-level institutions. Back in 1991, the OECD (1991) pointed out that the education system was also heavily examination-centred. This situation, as recently highlighted by the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast (Baird et al., 2015), still prevails, and is strongly supported by parents, school managers, teachers, and 'the general public.' Also, the second-level teachers' unions have displayed dogged opposition to the introduction of teacher-based assessment for national certification over many years. Furthermore, the national newspapers provide extensive coverage on the second-level State examinations every year, particularly on the Leaving Certificate examinations, and especially when students are sitting for them and when the results are released (Baird et al., 2015).

Ireland is not the only country where public cognisance of the importance of national examinations is high. On this, O'Sullivan (2014, p. 1) has reported on the nine million students in China who, every year, sit for nine-hour long university entrance examinations, known as the 'gao kao':

Traffic is diverted. Construction is stopped to minimize noise. Honking car horns are banned and flights are re-routed. For many Chinese students this entrance exam is a potential exit from poverty.

Also, newspaper editors around the world regard examination and testing matters as being of great interest to readers and likely to boost circulation figures, a matter demonstrated in relation to Australia by Shine and O'Donoghue (2013) and to England and Wales by Warmington and Murphy (2007).

What is unusual regarding Ireland is the volume and detail of the analyses on the Leaving Certificate examinations undertaken in the national newspapers on the examination questions every year, as well as on the relationship between how well students perform and the third-level places available when results are released. Baird et al. (2015) have

characterised this situation as being 'extraordinary' by international standards. This paper is based on a study of possible reasons for this.

The general atmosphere relating to the reporting just outlined has been summarised by O'Sullivan (2014, p. 2) when stating that, every June

...exam fever of epidemic proportions appears to infect the media mind-set. The temperature seems to rise year on year. The acres of news coverage of the state examinations equate with those of some natural disaster or national emergency.

In 2013, the then Minister for Education, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, stated that the nature of such media attention was not healthy as it added greatly to the stress levels of students (O'Sullivan, 2014).

Baird et al. (2015) demonstrate that the Irish media also reinforces a notion that the examinations should not contain major surprises and that this results in many students relying on prepared responses and rote learning. Furthermore, they argue that, apart from the situation in New York and Egypt, coverage of the Leaving Certificate examinations differs from that in newspapers elsewhere on similar examinations both in its volume and in the detail of the analyses undertaken on the questions. This reinforces a view that the Leaving Certificate is a high-stakes examination and greatly influences teaching and learning (Smyth, 1999; Smyth et al., 2007). On this, Hyland (2011, p. 4) has concluded that the examination is usually the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention, and "in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised." Because of his awareness of such practices, Minister Quinn instructed the State Examination Commission to engage the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment and Queen's University Belfast to investigate "problematic predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination and the existence of any unnecessarily granulated grading system" (Baird et al., 2015, p. 6). He sought research-based insights on how to reduce over-reliance on rote learning and of any "teaching to the test" which would inhibit students from becoming "critical thinkers and problem solvers with an intrinsic enjoyment of acquiring and using knowledge" (Baird et al., 2015, p. 6).

A key finding of the investigation is that the media narrative about predictability in the Leaving Certificate examinations has little basis in fact (Baird et al., 2015). An associated recommendation is that it is necessary to consider how to address this reality, given the importance of the Leaving Certificate examination in the lives of young Irish people. The present writers hold that one approach that can be taken in this regard involves tracing historically the emergence and development, particularly since the advent of free second-level education in 1967, of a mind-set in Ireland which accounts for why the Irish media has an audience that is receptive to the view that the examinations should not contain major surprises. In this regard, it can be seen as a response to the call of Hargreaves et al. (2007) for such studies to be located historically and to Donato and Lazerson's (2000, p. 10) challenge to address historical questions about current education issues that are too exciting and too important to leave unexamined.

1922 to 1967: Little Interest on the Part of the National Newspapers in the State Examinations

The Irish Free State was established in 1922. Two years later, a Department of Education was created (Coolahan, 1981). With the great majority of the Protestant population on the island of Ireland being located in the new Northern Ireland state, the vast majority of schools in the newly independent southern State were Catholic schools (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). Both the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches were provided with state subventions to help run the schools, while preserving managerial control. At the same time, because of the State's reluctance to take a leadership role in education up until the 1960s, it was almost

impossible to engage in national planning to address social and geographical disparities in the provision of second-level schools (O'Donoghue, 1999).

In 1924, while there were 493,382 students in primary schools in the State, secondary schools, which constituted the largest cohort within the second-level schooling sector, catered for only 22,897 students (Department of Education, 1926). The number of secondary school students increased gradually over the next four decades, until by 1955-56 it had reached 59,306 (The Survey Team, 1966). Overall, however, a great imbalance still existed between the number of students attending primary schools and those attending secondary schools, and it was even greater in the case of the numbers attending vocational schools, which were run by local vocational education committees and offered a two-year course which was essentially practical and oriented towards the world of work. Also, apart from a small minority of students, secondary schooling was not a realistic option for many of those in the poorer sectors of Irish society; as late as 1961, the children of professionals, managers and employers heavily outnumbered those from lower status occupations in the secondary schools, yet their parents constituted only 13 per cent of the work force (The Survey Team, 1966). Children of the unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers benefited least from secondary school education (The Survey Team, 1966; Nevin, 1968).

By the mid-1960s, the secondary school curriculum was largely the same as that introduced shortly after Irish independence. Education policy in the 'new Ireland' was strongly influenced by a determination to revive Irish as the national language and to promote Irish history, music and other traditions from the Gaelic culture (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2016). This emphasis was evident in the secondary schools, where the focus was on a general academic education in the grammar school tradition (O'Donoghue, 1999). Here, students were prepared for the Intermediate Certificate Examination, usually taken after three years of study, and the Leaving Certificate Examination, usually taken after another two years. Those enrolled in the smaller vocational education sector were not permitted to sit these examinations.

During the first decades of Independent-Ireland, The Department of Education tried to ensure questions on the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examination papers would not be predictable by doing away with the approach of the previous administration of prescribing set textbooks, leaving teachers free to select their own (O'Donoghue, 1999). Teachers, however, the majority of whom were Catholic priests, brothers and nuns, were very uncomfortable with this new freedom, complaining that individual programmes for certain subjects were too vague and offered little indication on content to be taught and teaching methods to be used (O'Donoghue, 1999). Their demands were so great regarding mathematics that a new programme was introduced in 1934, one that Brown (1983) has judged to have been compact and easy to examine, and ignored application to the demands of daily living.

Between 1939 and 1941, narrower programmes and set textbooks were introduced for Irish, English, Greek, Latin, and modern languages (O'Donoghue, 1999). The Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera, masterminded the changes, believing in "a little well done and thoroughly done" (De Valera, 1941, p. 184). He did not experience opposition from secondary school teachers, which is hardly surprising given that a large number of them were untrained; in 1938, for example, 1,400 of the 2,790 secondary school teachers in the schools did not meet the State-prescribed registration requirements (O'Donoghue, 1999). These unregistered teachers were themselves the products of a limited secondary school education in the pre-Independence era, one which has been characterised as having been "memorative, mechanical and arid" (Sheehy, 1968, p. 38). Also, registered teachers were free to teach subjects in which they did not have degree-level qualifications.

Teacher freedom became restricted in language subjects since courses and textbooks now became set and patterned in a cyclic way. Reading outside course prescriptions declined (Department of Education, 1962). Changes also followed in history and geography (O'Donoghue, 1999), which led to an emphasis on rote memory work. The prevailing attitude was captured by a number of writers who experienced secondary schooling during the decade. For example, Seán Ó Faoileáin (1973, p. 145), the noted writer, in a short story entitled 'Brainsy,' detailed the following instruction given to one of his teachers by the headmaster of a religious-run boys' school in the late 1940s:

I am sorry Mr. Kennedy, but you will just have to do as I say. All you need to do is to read the set-texts and keep a couple of pages ahead of the class....I want you to know I don't care two pins whether the boys are interested....My position is quite simple; I want my boys to get through their examination, and that is all I want.

In adopting such an approach, secondary school principals were responding to the expectation of the majority of parents and students. All knew that an Intermediate or a Leaving Certificate was a passport to a job in a bank, the civil service, a county council office, or an insurance company. For those who could afford to pay to attend university, a Leaving Certificate also opened the door to the graduate-based professions. Many who could not afford to take this path became primary school teachers or nurses, or entered religious life.

Secondary school students were on a straight and narrow road and knew what had to be done. As one former teacher from the 1940s observed:

The pupils lapped up the education. There were few idlers or smart alecs. The would-be class disturbers got a quick shift from the other members. They were paying for their education and they would see to it that they got value for money. (Colgan, 1986, p. 26)

The same individual recalled that teachers often responded as follows:

The difficulties involved in having students accepted to do exams without having completed a full course were surmounted. The ball was thrown into my court. With a few selected students in each grade we got down to the work of doing commerce for the Intermediate Certificate and accountancy for the Leaving Certificate. I was lucky. The students were lucky. They all got through their respective grades, some with honours. (Colgan, 1986, p. 25)

A study of past papers, he concluded, "revealed the mind of the examiner" (Colgan, 1986, p. 25).

The novelist, John McGahern, has described the emphasis placed on trial runs of the public examinations held at Christmas and Eastertime (Andrews, 1984, p. 165), while fellow novelist, John Banville, has spoken about "the diligent rabbiting away at the work" and the dedicated attitude of the Irish Christian Brothers who brought boys back to school on Saturday mornings for extra tuition that incurred no extra fee (Andrews, 1984, p. 202).

Through advertisements placed in national newspapers and magazines on the performances of their students in the State Certificate examinations and the 'special grinding' they offered to this end (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 125), secondary schools also reinforced the perception that their principal purpose was to help students obtain 'good' examination results.

The national newspapers rarely covered education topics, except in relation to major political speeches, or when the education unions were holding their annual conferences (Ó Búachalla, 1988). To some extent, if one wanted to stay abreast of national developments in education one had to consult the weekly column on Ireland in the British *Times Educational Supplement*. This can be attributed partly to secondary school education in Ireland being largely a middle-class preserve and not of relevance to the majority of the newspaper-reading public. Also, as Ó Búachalla (1988, p. 71) points out, there was no great interest at the

political level as “the portfolio of education occupied a low rank in the cabinet hierarchy,” with the absence of any serious political commitment to education change resulting in very little cabinet discussion. This is not surprising given huge levels of emigration and the agrarian nature of the Irish economy during the 1950s in a society where a main concern of government was with ‘balancing the financial books’ every year, rather than investing heavily in economic growth (Ferriter, 2004).

To conclude this section, newspaper coverage of national developments in education was only minimal for the phase in question, with none of the national newspapers having specialist education correspondents. Consideration of the phase also indicates there is nothing new about the current dominant perspective amongst parents about the career potential of secondary school education and schools communicating their careerist texts (O’Sullivan, 1992; 2005). What is different is that this perspective related to only a minority of the population back then. In 1965, however, the motions were put in place that would lead to radical change in this regard.

From 1967 to the Mid-1980s: Increased investment in education and greater media interest in the national examinations

The Irish State began showing signs of a more interventionist role in the provision and administration of education from the late 1950s. This trend increased significantly from the early 1960s. The most important stimulus was a commitment to economic expansion (Walsh, 2009) and the production of human capital (Lee, 1989; Gleeson, 2010) at a time when the State was applying to join the European Economic Community. Subsequent policies were legitimated by a report on Irish education entitled *Investment in Education* (Survey Team, 1966), partly financed by the OECD. The school-leaving age was raised to 15, small local primary and second-level schools were absorbed into larger regional units, capital grants were provided for secondary school expansion, small schools were encouraged to cooperate, and newer models of school governance with greater levels of state and parental involvement were introduced. The long-term outcome is reflected in the current pattern of school attendance, with the great majority of students now proceeding to a second-level school, where they remain for five or six years.

From 1967, the State financed the provision of ‘free’ education in secondary and vocational schools, and in newly-developed comprehensive schools (Walsh, 2009). This was later extended to two further types of schools which emerged, namely, community schools and community colleges. All five types of schools in this expanded second-level sector offered programmes leading to the Intermediate and Leaving Certificates. These initiatives were accompanied by the introduction of a State-funded grant system to assist those who reached a particular standard in the Leaving Certificate examinations in obtaining a third-level education along traditional lines or in new courses designed to link the education system with economic and social development (White, 2001). The latter were provided in the universities and in a newly-established technologically-oriented sector comprised of third level colleges and institutes of higher education. With parents and the authorities of second-level schools continuing to view the work of the teacher as being primarily about preparing students to obtain examination results which would gain them places in the higher education sector, the practice of concentrating in one’s teaching on building lesson content around anticipated examination questions became more important than ever (Government of Ireland, 1999; Hennessy, Hinchion, & MacNamara, 2011).

The new era also witnessed change in the political status of education. The Minister for Education now came to be regarded as an important cabinet post and the role came to be occupied by a series of relatively young and energetic ministers (McManus, 2014). Their status was elevated by the increasing attention given by the national newspapers to the

education developments set in motion. While there were still no specially appointed education correspondents employed by the national newspapers, education developments were reported in detail and a great mood of optimism was generated regarding the economic possibilities that would be opened up for individuals and for the nation. On this, Ó Buachalla (1988, p. 379) has demonstrated that extensive coverage was provided by two of the three national newspapers, namely, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, with coverage by the *Irish Press* (which ceased publication in 1995) focusing largely only on education policy on the Irish language.

Increase in interest in education amongst the population accelerated following the new level of reporting. This, in turn, led to a realisation that education was more newsworthy than previously thought and thus might lead to an increase in sales. As a result, journalists specialising in education were appointed to the *Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times*. John Walshe, the first such appointee to the *Irish Independent*, recalled that “a major emphasis on reporting on the Leaving Certificate examinations was not, in the early years, a characteristic of this new departure in Irish journalism.” He recalled how it only got a mention in rather light-hearted reporting of the experiences of children of government ministers, of well-known people and of celebrities, when they were sitting for the examination. The new development in Irish society of a certain number of adults sitting the examination, illustrating for the first time that one could have a ‘second chance’ also provided a point of interest for the paper.

Brown (2015) has pointed out that as the introduction of free second-level education for all in 1967 came to bear fruit and the country began to pride itself on its well-educated young people, *The Irish Times* responded by emulating the London *Times Educational Supplement* in founding the weekly *Education Times* in 1972, with its own editor. It covered education issues in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic, and dealt with all sectors and levels, from preschool to third level. For example, it had a supplement with advice on pedagogical matters and examples of lesson planning to help primary school teachers in the teaching of a new curriculum introduced in 1971. Equally, it dealt with multid denominational education, the integrated-education movement in Northern Ireland, concerns in the Catholic Church about a perceived secularization of education, proposed assessment reforms, and the financing of higher education. However, being unable to raise significant revenue from advertisements for teaching posts, in February 1976 a decision was made to cease publication.

Another development, however, came to the fore. The previous year, *The Irish Times* had taken an initiative which had a more long-term influence when it appointed Ms. Christina Murphy, who had already had experience in social and community work, as education correspondent. Very quickly, she established herself as the country’s foremost education journalist, concentrating “on raising controversial and sensitive issues in a thoughtful way in order to try to provoke wide discussion on them” (Brown, 2015, p. 315). For example, on 17 March 1976, she pleaded in *The Irish Times* for sex education to be offered in all Irish schools. She also felt obliged to inform and explain to parents and pupils participating in what was by now a mass second-level education system, how it operated and what could be expected from it, thus reflecting the thrust of reporting on financial, business and industrial life in Ireland at the time (Brown, 2015). This sense of obligation led her in the late 1970s to set in train developments which contributed to the emergence of an extraordinary level of interest being shown by the national newspapers in the Leaving Certificate examination every year.

At the same time, second-level education continued to be examination-led. The perpetuation of the practice that prevailed from the foundation of the State of neglecting to officially prescribe any overall aims and objectives for Irish second-level education, apart from stating what subjects should be studied (Gleeson, 2010; OECD, 1991; Mulcahy, 1981; 1989), contributed to this situation. This left a vacuum readily filled by past examination

papers, which became the real syllabus and, as Madaus and McNamara (1970) pointed out over 46 years ago, rewarded lower level cognitive outcomes. Thirty-three years later Elwood and Carlisle (2003) reported that little had changed. This situation, along with the pitifully low levels of investment in teacher development (Sugrue et al., 2001), assured the dominance of transmission beliefs, structuring practices, expository teaching (Gilleece et al., 2009) and 'teaching to the examination.' When a national Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board was established in 1983, the intention was that it would facilitate the integration of curriculum and assessment. However, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which replaced it in 1987, became responsible for curriculum only, with examinations being the responsibility of the separate and independent State Examinations Commission.

The Mid-1980s to the Present: A Growing Market for Media Coverage on the State Examinations

Between 1970 and 1980 twelve new publicly-funded third-level teaching institutions were launched (White, 2001) in Ireland, and some of the universities and some other higher education institutions collaborated in the establishment of a central clearing house, the Central Applications Office (CAO) in 1976. A binary system of higher education emerged as the existing universities expanded and less traditional colleges and institutes were established. By 1980, thirteen years after the introduction of free second-level education, the full-time student body in the higher-education sector overall had increased by 145 percent over the previous ten years (Department of Education, 1982). Also, while the number of students at university comprised 55 percent of all full-time third-level students, the number of new entrants to the non-university sector in the same year was greater than the number of new undergraduates (Clancy, 1988, p. 13), a situation which can be attributed partly to the very high unemployment rates in the country and the increasing emphasis which was being placed by the State on vocational education and training, with financial support from the European Union. Those attending university in the mid-1980s were predominantly from the middle and upper-middle classes, and no great pressure was felt amongst them regarding their future monopoly of this sector. By 1996, however, the situation had changed significantly, with 62 percent of those leaving school proceeding to full-time post-second level education and the percentage of the population with higher education qualifications being 31.2 percent, which was significantly above the European Union average of 20.9 percent (Clancy, 1989).

Following the re-establishment in 1989 of the National Institute of Higher Education Limerick (Fleming, 2012) and the National Institute of Higher Education Dublin as two independent universities, approximately the same number of students were accepting places for university degrees as were accepting certificate, diploma and degree places in the non-university sector. The significance of this is that all social classes were now coming under increasing pressure to obtain third-level college places, most of which were allocated almost solely on the basis of one's results in the Leaving Certificate examination. This pressure was amplified by the situation whereby the number of second-level students now sitting for the Leaving Certificate examination had increased from about 75 percent to 80 percent over the previous two decades, while the Intermediate Certificate examination was no longer sufficient as a qualification for most positions and a third-level qualification was becoming essential for a much greater number of occupations than had historically been the case.

Relatedly, the available places in the higher education sector were reaching saturation point and competition for places on courses for entry to high-status professions was greater than ever (O'Connell, McCloy & Clancy, 2006; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). Unofficial league tables of universities in terms of prestige now began to take on a new significance as each institution within the already higher-status university sector began to compete to attract those students with the highest level of achievement in the Leaving Certificate examination.

Teachers, as a result, came under more pressure than ever before to help their students get 'good' results. Thus, it is not surprising that the practice of the earlier phases of interrogating past examination papers in order to try to detect patterns in the questions was maintained, if not amplified.

A significant proportion of parents also began to opt out of sending their children to schools within the regular second-level sector, choosing instead to send them to one of a number of full-time private tuition centres, colloquially known as 'grind schools.' These are business enterprises that have been established solely to prepare students for the Leaving Certificate examination and operate on a purely commercial basis (Lynch & Moran, 2006; Smyth, 2009). Concurrently, a substantial private market for individual tutors, charging substantial fees for specialised tuition after school hours and often in the home of the tutor or that of the student, has developed.

Against this background, a whole new market for newspaper coverage of education grew up alongside the regular reporting of developments and initiatives internationally. This market was recognised by Christina Murphy at *The Irish Times* who, in the 1970s, became cognisant that many parents who had not obtained a third-level education themselves were becoming aware of the opportunities for social mobility provided for their children by the education developments taking place. She advocated for the abolition of the existing entry system to many third level institutions which required that, along with their Leaving Certificate examination results, they had to travel to a variety of colleges to present portfolios of work relevant to their chosen areas of study and also be interviewed. Thus, she contested a practice which left itself open to accusations of nepotism and cronyism, as well as being very wasteful of the time of many people. Her reporting on this was one of a number of forces that influenced the setting up of the CAO, mentioned early on in this paper.

The CAO system developed and grew accordingly as the number of available courses and annual student applications increased during the 1970s and 1980s (Government of Ireland, 1999). The practice of different universities using different selection systems and allocating different weightings to particular subjects was now changed, with the introduction of a common points' system in 1992 leading to "improvements in clarity and transparency for higher education applicants" (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.15) and for parents and the general public. Another consequence was that young people, "instead of stating their results in terms of subjects and grade levels achieved, as issued by the State Examination Commission...usually respond to the question of 'How did you get on in the Leaving Certificate' with the reply, 'I got X number of points.'"

Walshe attributes Murphy with pioneering what he terms "a consumer journalism" in education that was much to the satisfaction of the marketing personnel at *The Irish Times* as it helped to increase sales. These increased further when Murphy turned her attention to the Leaving Certificate examination, proposing how one could maximise one's opportunity of getting good examination results. Also, the fact that the examination is held in June was fortuitous from the perspective of the newspapers. This is a time when little else is happening in relation to the daily rhythms of social and political life, with many people on vacation, and with the courts and the Dáil (the Lower House of Parliament) often not in session.

The remarkable proliferation of higher education courses since the 1990s accentuated the needs of students, parents and the general public for information and guidance on the Leaving Certificate examination:

When applying for a place in higher education through the CAO, students can choose from over 1,330 courses in over 45 higher education institutions. Over 880 of these are Level 8 courses and more than 440 are at Levels 6 or 7. The overall number of courses has trebled over the past 20 years with the growth being most significant ... in

institutes of technology. Some courses are highly specialized with only a small number of places available. (Hyland, 2011, p. 4)

Initially, the emphasis in *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* was on how to study and prepare for the examinations. This led to the production of examination supplements, which were offered to schools at a discount. These 'exam briefs' and associated 'special supplements' focused on those areas of the syllabus in different subjects on which they deemed one should concentrate in order to be well prepared. According to Walshe, newspapers' marketing departments were strongly motivated by the goal of capturing 'the ABC category readers of the future' at an early age in the hopeful expectation that these future earners would continue to purchase that particular newspaper throughout their adult lives. Also, he recalled, not all teachers were impressed when the *Irish Independent* established a relationship with the large full-time private enterprise in Dublin entitled 'The Institute of Education.' This involved teachers at the Institute writing 'tips' for examination success, thus portraying themselves as 'experts' and legitimating the authority and image of grind schools. Some teachers and schools, along with the teachers' unions, saw this as undermining their efforts to provide a broad education for their students.

The Irish Times also commenced a practice, emulated by the other national newspapers, of quoting comments from teachers on the perceived difficulty or otherwise of an examination the day after it is held, along with reactions of parents and students. Walshe recalls that he initially opposed imitating the practice at the *Irish Independent* on the grounds that it put unfair pressure on students at a stressful time in their lives, but was overruled by the business reality of marketing and sales considerations. At the same time, it would be remiss not to point out that the national newspapers also began to include what Walshe has referred to as 'human interest' material in relation to the examinations. For example, during his time at the *Irish Independent*, he initiated the publication of an 'examination diary' centred, as he put it, on "a student writing his or her daily experiences where both pressure and relief are recounted." These and other initiatives, however, continue to be overshadowed by the extraordinary attention devoted to the Leaving Certificate examination questions each year.

The teachers' unions also engage in practices associated with the reporting of the Leaving Certificate examination questions. In particular, they provide the newspapers each year with lists of members they can contact for comment. On this, we cautiously speculate that involvement in the practice may have generated a perception amongst the unions that they possess authority in the area. Individual union members are also happy to be quoted. Given that they normally comment on the difficulty and predictability of the papers, we are also prompted to suggest that this may reinforce a view that good teaching is primarily about providing students with the knowledge and skills to achieve high marks in what they believe should be predictable examination papers, and that the best teachers are those who have the greatest number of students achieving the highest marks.

The media coverage spread to Radio Telefis Éireann, the national broadcasting service, which began to provide a daily radio commentary in conjunction with *The Irish Times*, when the national examinations were taking place. This can be sensational, reporting students leaving examination halls in floods of tears and using such emotive language as 'disgracefully difficult' when commenting on the wording of the questions on particular examination papers.

Another development was the production of newspaper supplements when the examination results were made publicly available in the middle of August and when the first round of college offers became available a week or so later. Walshe has pointed out that staff began preparing for this from late July, planning special supplements based on basic analyses of salient trends in exam results and in the spread of college offers. The supplements offered

advice on such matters as further and higher education options, higher education grants, and student accommodation. The *Irish Independent*, in conjunction with the National Parents Council, introduced a phone-in helpline. Soon a similar service was being offered by *The Irish Times*, with calls from students and parents being handled by guidance counsellors. This strategy increased newspaper sales and advertising revenue as banks and other companies jockeyed to generate interest in their products amongst those of college-going age.

On certain occasions, competition between the two main newspapers reached farcical levels. In the initial years of the CAO system, for example, the newspapers published the college offers in their supplements. This was long before they became available on the internet. All a student had to do was purchase a copy of the newspaper, check his or her CAO number and read what course he or she had been offered. Students began to queue outside newspaper offices late at night for the first edition of the newspaper. On this, Walshe has recalled how, on one occasion, *The Irish Times* hired a helicopter to bring early copies of the newspaper from Dublin to Galway, where it was met by hundreds of students and by a TV crew who reported the event on the late-night news. This, he remarked, "led to high sales." The CAO eventually responded by deciding to cease publishing the first round of offers in the newspapers. Instead, only the 'cut-off' points' requirements for each course on offer were given. Nevertheless, the supplements continue, as Walshe has put it, to be "big money-and-sales spinners" for the newspapers and are likely to continue to be into the future.

Conclusion

Levels of media interest in the State examinations have increased dramatically since the establishment of the independent Irish State in 1922. From its beginnings in what was an insular, agrarian, post-colonial state, education in Ireland has, under the influence of cultural strangers (O'Sullivan, 1992) such as the OECD and the EU, become a mass institution, heavily influenced by market values and human capital production. The associated inordinately high levels of media interest in the Irish State examinations tell a cautionary tale and raise obvious questions, namely, what has predisposed Ireland to such levels of interest and what might the lessons be for education systems in other jurisdictions?

While many historical and societal influences shed light on the first question, we confine ourselves in this conclusion to explanations to do with curriculum and assessment policy and practice. In an environment dominated by classical humanism (OECD, 1991), Irish syllabus documents, up until twenty years after the introduction of free second-level education in 1967, focused primarily, if not exclusively, on content (Mulcahy, 1981), with learning outcomes being eschewed. Teachers, as a result, came to regard the examination papers as the syllabus. This encouraged them to employ expository teaching (Gilleece et al., 2008), encourage rote learning (Hyland, 2011; OECD, 1991) and gamble with the predictability of examination questions. Despite advances made by the NCCA (Gleeson, 2010), it will take quite some time to change this culture, particularly as the teachers' unions continue to resist the introduction of forms of assessment of student learning that would complement terminal, high-stakes examinations.

Irish examination results are reported as letter grades and there has been no attempt made to define the meanings of these grades in terms of student learning. It is hardly surprising then that students perceive their entire educational achievement in terms of the number of CAO points attained and that they are avid readers of the 'consumer journalism' central to much of the discussion in this paper. Such a utilitarian and technical mindset calls for a critical response from politicians and for the belated embracement by them of an underlying philosophy of education able to challenge narrow traditional ideas about curriculum as well as prevailing market values. Any such move requires strong moral leadership from government, the education partners, and the citizenry.

There are other lessons also. One of the proposed responses to grave public concern regarding the enormous pressure experienced by Irish Leaving Certificate students is to require higher education institutions (HEIs) to learn from the example of other countries by postponing specialization and providing broad, generic courses during the early years (Hyland, 2011). In effect, this shifts the burden of allocating places on highly prized courses from school leaving examinations to HEIs.

Finally, there are important implications for the teaching profession. The prevailing approach to examinations in Ireland turns teachers into technicians who are governed by numbers (Grek, 2009; Burrows & Savage, 2014), while ensuring that parents and students are enthusiastic readers of media coverage of all aspects of the State examinations. This offers a serious challenge to the meaning of teacher professionalism, the moral purpose of teaching, and the current policies of the teachers' unions. It also raises fundamental questions regarding the current values in Irish society. Finally, and not unrelatedly, a comparison of the Irish situation with that in Egypt and New York State, the other two education jurisdictions where levels of media coverage of State examinations are also particularly high (Baird et al., 2015), would be very interesting.

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