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As with other sectors, one issue – the Covid-19 pandemic – dominated the year, with ramifications across the sector, perhaps most notably in respect of the Leaving Certificate. So dominant was the impact of Covid that in other respects the year was quiet. However, the general election in February 2020, and following the protracted government formation talks, resulted in a new department, new ministers and junior ministers. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was created and the Department of Education and Skills was renamed the Department of Education. Norma Foley, a first-time TD and former teacher from Kerry, was appointed Minister for Education in June; Simon Harris, TD, former Minister for Health, was appointed Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, while Josepha Madigan, TD, and Niall Collins, TD, were appointed Ministers of State for, respectively, Special Education and Inclusion, and Skills and Further Education. Following on from the appointment of Ministers Foley and Harris, both the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will publish new statements of strategy in 2021.

Covid-19

On 12 March an announcement was made by then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, TD, of the closure of schools, pre-schools, and further and higher education settings for a period until 29 March 2020, to support

efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19. This mirrored similar announcements in many other EU countries.

In order to minimise the impact on teaching and learning, all schools were asked to continue to plan lessons and, where possible, provide online resources for students or online lessons where schools were equipped to do so. Schools were also asked to be conscious of students who did not have access to online facilities and to consider this actively in their response, and to prioritise supporting exam classes to continue to prepare for state examinations.

The initial announcement was followed a week later by a further announcement indicating that Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate oral and practical performance tests had been cancelled. The decision was taken in the light of the closure of schools, with tests due to take place in March and early April. At Leaving Certificate level the value of the practical/oral elements ranges from 20 to 40 per cent, though in music it can represent up to half the overall grade. A decision was made to award all students due to take the tests full marks for this portion of the exam.

In early April it was announced that further and higher education centres would not hold written, oral or practical assessments in examination centres for the end of the 2019/20 academic year, but instead had put other arrangements in place and communicated these to students. At this point, and with schools remaining closed, the Leaving Certificate exams moved centre stage.

Amidst ongoing concern from students (O'Kelly, 2020), it was initially announced on 10 April that the exams would be postponed, beginning in the last week of July or early August, with students having at least two weeks of class time, in school, prior to the exams commencing. It was also indicated that Junior Certificate final exams would be replaced by school-based assessments, to take place early in autumn 2020. An advisory group of stakeholders was put in place in order to manage the implementation of these arrangements. This encompassed representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the department.

The discussions continued through April, amidst ongoing concerns from the teachers' unions over the workability of the new exams schedule and also the requirement for teachers to work during the school holidays (O'Brien, 2020). However, following a cabinet

decision in early May it was announced that students could elect to receive calculated grades rather than sit the postponed Leaving Certificate, which would now not take place until the autumn. It was noted that the decision was taken ‘following an assessment of public health advice and other information and the implications for holding the exams on the previously rescheduled date of Wednesday 29 July 2020’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2020a). It was further indicated that calculated grades would involve two phases: school-based assessment and national standardisation. Later in May, a guidance document, developed in consultation with the advisory group, was published to provide principals and teachers with information on the process of estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades. In addition to advice on the procedures involved, the document noted that canvassing would not be tolerated in any circumstances and that arrangements had been put in place to extend a state indemnity to teachers, principals and school boards of management. Following publication of the guidance document, consultation with the teachers’ unions continued regarding clarifications sought by their members. Concerns in respect of the legal indemnity for teachers was a particular issue of concern. By the end of May over 98 per cent of the total of 61,029 students who had been expected to sit the Leaving Certificate exams in 2020 had registered on the department’s calculated grades portal.

However, concerns in respect of the calculated grades approach continued, and were particularly heightened by evidence emerging from England and Scotland showing that pupils and schools in disadvantaged areas were marked down the most harshly by the statistical model used to replace exams (Adams & McIntyre, 2020). As a result, it was announced by Minister Foley that in calculating the grades of Irish students, the historical performance of schools would not be included in the standardisation model; instead the marks awarded by students’ teachers would only be adjusted to ensure a consistent approach across the country was applied when judging the performance of students. It was further communicated by the department (Department of Education, 2020b) that as a result of the revised approach:

- the average reduction of student marks following standardisation was 0.8 per cent in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools, while the reduction in non-DEIS schools was 1.3 per cent;

- in terms of grades, across all levels, 79.3 per cent of student grades remained unchanged by standardisation, 3.9 per cent of grades were increased, while 16.9 per cent of grades were reduced.

The Leaving Certificate results were issued on 7 September, about three weeks later than usual. However, further confusion arose when it emerged that there were errors in the code used in the national standardisation of grades process. This meant that incorrect grades were issued to some students when they received their results on 7 September. The department indicated that the errors were being rectified and that a series of independent checks were underway. As a result of the process, approximately 10 per cent of students would receive improved results and no student would be downgraded as a result of the errors.

In November 2,569 students sat the postponed, written Leaving Certificate exams. The option to sit the written exams when it was deemed safe to do so was offered to all students regardless of whether they received calculated grades or not. In addition, a small number of adult learner and early school-leavers were afforded the opportunity to sit Junior Certificate exams.

While the Leaving Certificate issues were prominent, efforts were also in place by all schools to ensure they reopened to students in September. Engagement with stakeholders on the public health advice and planning process continued over the summer. Difficulties in relation to reduced capacity on school transport was a prominent issue. For children eligible for but unable to avail of school transport, the department agreed to pay a grant to subsidise the cost of alternative arrangements.

There were further challenges for schools when it was announced in October that ViraPro, a hand sanitiser widely used in schools, was to be removed from the product register due to public health concerns associated with it. All products were required to be withdrawn and returned to the supplier.

While schools remained open through the October Level 5 restrictions of the *Plan for Living with Covid-19*, in late December, with dramatically increasing number of Covid cases, it was initially decided that schools would delay reopening after Christmas until 11 January 2021. However, on 6 January 2021, it was announced that schools would not reopen, with remote learning procedures activated until at least 1 February.

Special education

During school closures in spring 2020, particular concerns arose in respect of the needs of students from DEIS schools and also children with special needs, who acutely felt the disruption to their usual routine. As a result it was announced that a summer programme, either through home tuition or summer camps, would be made available to these children.

In September Minister Madigan announced key priorities for action to reform and develop special education provision in Ireland. The objective in identifying priorities is to ensure concrete progress in respect of special education provision.

In October Minister Madigan announced a consultation process with education stakeholders in respect of draft good-practice guidelines on supporting students with autism. The good-practice guidelines provide information and resources to support the well-being, learning and participation of students. Schools will be supported to implement the guidance.

Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 commenced

In January then Minister Joe McHugh, TD, signed a commencement order in respect of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, resulting in new rules in respect of school admissions. These represent further measures on foot of the legislation enacted in 2018. Sections commenced in 2018 included a prohibition on Catholic schools from using religion as a selection criteria in school admissions. These measures require schools to admit all applicants, where a school has places, and set out in an admissions policy, communicated to parents, the manner and sequence in which selection criteria will be applied in the case of oversubscription, with religion not allowed to be a consideration.

The new measures place a ban on schools using waiting lists, though existing waiting lists where a commitment of a place has been made to parents can run their course. In addition, they prohibit interviews; consideration of a student's academic ability, skills or aptitude, apart from in cases of special educational need; or consideration of a parent's occupation, financial status, academic ability, skills or aptitude as criteria in deciding who is offered a place in a school. The commencement order provides for the new laws to come into effect in respect of applications made for admissions to schools for the 2021/22

school year onwards, with boards of management required to prepare new draft admissions policies, in consultation with patrons, parents and staff, by summer 2020.

Employment of school secretaries

Ongoing industrial relations action by school secretaries was suspended with a decision in January by the Fórsa trade union to defer strike action and to re-enter negotiations at the Workplace Relations Commission.

Draft Primary Curriculum Framework

In February a new *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* was made available for public consultation for a period up until the end of October. It was noted that the new curriculum will 'build on the strengths and successes of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum while responding to challenges, changing needs and priorities' (Department of Education and Skills, 2020b).

Education statistics

In December *Education Indicators* (Department of Education, 2020a), a report highlighting key statistics from the education sector, was published. This is a continuation of an initiative commenced in 2019, aimed at providing a comprehensive set of indicators for the education system in Ireland.

The data in the report cover all levels of education, starting with early years and working through school education, further and higher education through to lifelong learning. The report provides an overview of the work of both the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Some notable findings from the report at school level include:

- There were 567,716 children in primary school and a further 371,450 in secondary school, between them being taught by 66,932 teachers.
- The average number of pupils per teacher in primary school stood at 15.0 while in secondary school it was 12.8.

- The number of children in special classes in mainstream primary schools continues to rise, and stood at 6,822 in 2019, up from 4,355 in 2015. There were 13,530 special education teachers and 15,799 special needs assistants.
- The number of multi-denominational primary schools rose to 153 in 2019, up from 120 five years earlier.
- There were 211,274 graduates across all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in 2018.
- There were 69,726 graduates who received an award at honours degree level (NFQ Level 8) or higher in 2018.
- The number of part-time and remote students is rising steadily, with part-time rising from 37,000 in 2015 to 43,000 in 2018.
- The number of people taking up apprenticeships is rising strongly, up from 8,317 in 2015 to 17,829 in 2019.

Ireland performed extremely well in the TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study) 2019 results, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The performance of Irish students in maths and science has remained strong and stable. The highlight was Ireland's top placing from among EU countries in maths at both fourth class in primary schools and second year in post-primary.

Budget 2021

Budget 2021 increased the education budget by €410 million, or approximately 5 per cent. The increased expenditure will primarily be focused on DEIS schools, special education and reducing the pupil–teacher ratio. As a result, 1,065 new teaching posts will be created.

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