

SECTION THREE

Book and Policy Reviews

Policy Review: UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All

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Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. 2018. *The Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018–2020*. Dublin: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. 2018. *Ireland: Voluntary National Review 2018 Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda to the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*. Dublin: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

In his foreword to the Irish Government’s *Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan, 2018–2020*, An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, described the United Nations’ *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Transforming our World* - as ‘the international community’s roadmap for collective progress towards the kind of world we want to see’. The *Agenda* was adopted by all 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN) and sets out a framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which cover the social, economic and environmental requirements for a sustainable future. The SDGs represent the most ambitious agreement the UN has ever reached and focus on the ‘5 Ps’: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. Building on the experience of the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000, the hallmark of the 2030 SDGs is that they (i) apply to all countries equally; (ii) address all the social, economic and environmental requirements for sustainable development; (iii) include a stronger role for the public, particularly in monitoring progress in implementing the SDGs.

This agenda is different! The 17 SDGs do not differentiate between rich and poor countries. Every single country is challenged to achieve the SDGs. The old

dichotomy of North and South no longer prevails as humanity faces what are increasingly acknowledged as existential challenges. While the agreement on the Sustainable Development Goals is not legally binding, each UN member state has committed to achieving them. The *Agenda* includes a review and follow-up process to measure progress towards achieving the Goals over the next 15 Years. Countries are encouraged to develop national responses to the *Sustainable Development Agenda*. Another key difference in this new global agenda is the focus on targets and indicators to measure progress in meeting those targets.

Concomitant with its lead role in co-facilitating with Kenya the final inter-governmental talks on the *2030 Agenda*, the Irish Government continued to demonstrate leadership by early publication of its *National Implementation Plan* and submitted its first national progress report to the United Nations in June 2018. While both were broadly welcomed by Coalition 2030, an alliance of over 100 civil society groups and networks, concerns were also expressed in relation to the lack of detail, particularly in relation to costings, targets and outcomes. The need to systematically involve stakeholders in the planning and delivery process was underlined as was the need for sustained political leadership of the overall *2030 Agenda* process.

Unfortunately, those involved in adult and community education must give a much more qualified response to both documents. Not only is there little or no reference to adult learning in the context of adult and community education in the *National Implementation Plan*, the focus of actions aimed at adults under Goal 4 are exclusively framed in terms of national priorities for skills development, participation in the labour market, further education and training, and higher education. There is one anodyne reference to lifelong learning: ‘people across Ireland will engage more with lifelong learning’ (*National Implementation Plan*, 2018, p. 75). Adult and community education is equally absent in the *Progress Report* which briefly states that higher and further education are ‘responding strongly to the challenge of meeting Ireland’s human capital needs’ (p. 38).

On the face of it, this low prioritisation of adult and community education as a distinct modality of lifelong learning is at odds with the overall approach of the *2030 Agenda* which identifies Goal 4 as central to the achievement of other development goals. In particular, education is viewed as having a catalytic role in relation to progress on Goal 3 Health and Wellbeing; Goal 5 Gender Equality; Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth; Goal 12 Responsible

Consumption and Production; and Goal 13 Climate Change Mitigation. As noted by Milana *et al.*, (2017), the conception of education in these different goals draws on underlying values of much adult and lifelong education and learning practice. For example, the UNESCO 2016 guidelines on Goal 4 identify its three underlying principles of (i) education as a fundamental human right and enabling right (ii) education as a social good; (iii) education as inextricably linked to gender equality.

Within Goal 4 itself, adult and community education has strong linkages with four out of the seven targets: Goal 4.3, equal access to technical / vocational and higher education; Goal 4.4, relevant skills for access to decent work; Goal 4.5, gender equality and inclusion; and Goal 4.7, education for sustainable development and global citizenship. This lack of articulation between adult and community education and the transformative role of education in the 2030 Agenda in general and in Goal 4 has been attributed to a number of factors, in particular, the overriding emphasis on empirical targets and indicators in the 2030 Agenda and the dominance of human capital models in global education discourse. The OECD subtly noted that ‘significant challenges remain for many countries with respect to achieving targets that measure learning outcomes and equity’ (OECD, 2017, p. 27). The challenge therefore for AONTAS and the wider adult learning community is to articulate targets and indicators for adult learning that capture the humanistic conceptions and practices of non-formal adult learning. The articulation of such a metric would ensure that this domain of adult learning can no longer be considered as ‘invisible’ by the state which has responsibility promoting and monitoring progress in Goal 4. Parallel with this, there are enormous opportunities for the adult learning community to articulate visions and to develop practices to promote Goal 4.7: ‘all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development’. Sustained political engagement around Goal 4.7 represents an opportunity to open up the value of transformative education that is about critical thinking, social action, engagement, community development and empowerment, gender equality and about living together.

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Policy Review: New Skills Agenda for Europe

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European Commission. 2016. *A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness*. Brussels: European Commission.

It is already commonplace for policy analysis to state that policy documents contain concepts and approaches that are socially constructed and value loaded. However, it is still necessary to look at the narratives behind wording and concepts and to shed more light on the political and economic backgrounds of the discussed problems and proposed solutions.

The subtitle of the *Agenda* reveals clearly the motivation and thinking behind the document, as well as the values on which it is based: ‘Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness’. Although the *Agenda* doesn’t indicate any ambition to enter the sphere of education and to intervene in the main social problems, we consider this detachment to be the main weakness of the *Agenda*. Dealing with skills out of the education realm gives them a strictly instrumental and fractional character, and narrows down the potential they might have in innovation and development. Coming from the human capital theory, the *Agenda* focus mostly on hyper-individualism and maximised competitiveness as the main values. Furthermore, disconnecting economic growth and employment from political-democratic goals and the social dimension of the European Union (EU), is seriously harming the balance between three main dimensions of development – economic, social and environmental.

The first paragraph in the *New Skills Agenda* proposes skills as a crucial and universal solution for employment and active participation in society:

Skills are a pathway to employability and prosperity. With the right skills, people are equipped for good-quality jobs and can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens. In a fast-changing global economy, skills will to a great extent determine competitiveness and the capacity to drive innovation. They are a pull factor for investment and a catalyst in the virtuous circle of job creation and growth. They are key to social cohesion.

The process of framing a problem is essential in any political process. Without doubt, many European countries are facing high rates of unemployment, but the point is how unemployment is described? Therefore, we are interested in the explanations of complex realities across Europe and how they justify investments in vocational education and training (VET) and skills for jobs:

Skills mismatches hinder productivity and growth and affect Member States' resilience to economic shocks.

Productivity and growth are placed at the top of the European Commission's list of priorities. Widely accepted, hardly ever critically reflected, skills have a fascinating attractiveness for all those who are seeking for a closer relation between education and work, for more effectiveness and standardisation, for establishing procedures, quality criteria and measuring. This kind of popularity made 'skills' a kind of *deus ex machina* for any problem, be it in the field of policy, research or practice. One of the reason of the charm of the concept might be the perceived neutrality.

On the contrary, it could be argued that skills supported (or followed) a move towards a neoliberal approach in adult education. Skills are context-related in such a 'loose' way that they cannot be easily linked with the situation of an individual, with his/her life context and the meaning that is attached. An additional aspect is that the reductionist characteristic of skill put responsibility for education and learning process on an individual. We tend to forget the millions of those who are in precarious jobs or jobless, very often not because of the lack of skills. Even more important – research show that current high unemployment rates cannot be attributed to skills mismatch, but have more structural and systemic causes. The need to 'equip' people with skills tend to dangerously blur these causes and look for a solution in the 'narrow street' of skills mismatch. The experiences of successful companies are pointing out a completely different approach – the innovations are not coming from good and well trained set of skills, they are boosted by creativity, thinking out-of-the-box, personal development etc.

Soft skills and transferable skills appear as a kind of a new answer that should balance economic and social dimension, employability and participation, growth and inclusion. But they appear more as decoration and a poor attempt to keep the earlier balance of these two main pillars of European education policy. The *Agenda* states that ‘job creation and growth ... are key to social cohesion’ but it is not elaborated, not explained how or what else should be done for skills to overcome its narrow character and help Europe to meet the new social and political challenges it is facing nowadays. ‘Civic education does not create new jobs!’ used to be the mantra in EU education policy, but probably one of the myths – civic education, general education, culture and art can create a working environment where skills might innovate and not reproduce, help motivate and not compete, boost development of people and environment and not only economic growth.

The *New Skills Agenda* is one more example of the influence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) perspective on EU policy making, especially after the triumph of the concept of measuring learning outcomes, incorporated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study. After the results were published, PIAAC was an important wakeup call for Europe, but perhaps it was not read and interpreted in a right way. It was an indicator, but not policy guidance; it indicated the problem, but the solution needed deeper analysis of causes and complex solution based on long-term strategy. The *Agenda* is a symptom of incorporating OECD logic within EU educational policy, without moving further on through visionary, interdisciplinary thinking, rooted in positive European traditions and its comparative advantages.

Finally, what will be the future of education if we make VET a first choice (*New Skills Agenda*, p. 6)? Should ‘education’ in the future be replaced by the term ‘upskilling’ and ‘reskilling’? What will happen to personal development, creativity, critical thinking, relatedness, openness, tolerance, empathy, and trust? Will adult education be reduced to a recruiting centre and a space for boosting skills? Will these other ‘skills’ disappear from the education agenda just because they do not fit the term and are falsely not considered important to economic growth?

Book Review: Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning: A History of Irish Education 1800–2016

JOHN COOLAHAN

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, 2017

ISBN: 987-1-910393-18-5

REVIEWED BY DES MURTAGH

‘In order to go forward, sometimes one has to go back.’

I first benefited from the work of Professor John Coolahan in the early 1980’s. While working within the Irish Education Sector and studying for my H.Dip., Coolahan’s first edition of *Irish Education: History and Structures* (1981) proved invaluable for a succinct depiction of the multi-faceted Irish education system. The 1981 publication was divided into two sections, 1800-1960 and 1960-1980. Among the chapters covered were:

- Primary Education
- Secondary (Intermediate) Education
- Technical / Vocational Education
- University Education
- Adult Education

Thirty-six years later and with a significant number of re-prints and updates, John Coolahan published his last book, *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning: A history of Irish Education 1800-2016*. This publication comprised of three sections, 1800-1960, 1960-1980 and 1980-2016 and as per the title changes from 1981 (History and Structure) to 2017 (Era of Lifelong Learning), the chapters’ headings similarly reflect the change in descriptive language illustrating the new sectors that have emerged over 36 years, encompassing the goal of enabling lifelong learning:

- Early childhood education
- Primary education
- Post-primary education
- Higher education
- Further education and training (FET) and adult education

Having worked for over 20 years in the adult education sector within a number of Vocational Education Committees (VECs), I can recognise within chapter 17 how Coolahan has sought to pull together the numerous threads of policies, programmes and practices between 1980 and 2016 that would culminate with the establishment of a fourth pillar within the Irish educational system. In 2013, according to Coolahan, Further Education and Training (FET) became a nationally recognised sector in its own right alongside primary, post-primary and tertiary education.

Historically, under the heading of FET and adult education, Coolahan highlights the separate spheres and twin track approach to education and training that was the Irish education system from the 1800's and continued until recent years with the formulation of two separate Educational Acts, the *Vocational Education Act* (1930) and the *Apprenticeship Act* (1931). Since almost the beginning of the Irish Free State, separate government departments have held responsibility for initial and continuing vocational training, the Department of Education (VECs) and the Department of Labour / subsequently the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (AnCo and subsequently FÁS). In Ireland schools did not adopt the dual mode of academic and technical / vocational modes similar to other countries such as Germany and some of the Scandinavian countries. Coolahan refers on many occasions to the lack of a coherent policy along with a unified national approach that was required for the provision of full unity of purpose.

During the 1990's adult education and second chance education was brought distinctly into focus following numerous Commissions, Conferences and Conventions in Ireland and the European Union (EU) resulting in the publication of Green Papers and White Papers. One Convention in 1993 concluded that for the future well-being of FET and adult education, a coherent policy framework, a structured accreditation policy and a comprehensive

national budget were prerequisites. Green Papers and White Papers set out a range of recommendations to remedy deficiencies. Despite detailing many of the recommendations Coolahan seldom comments on them. Many recommendations were, in my opinion, ambitious and while some selected aspects were implemented, the overall proposals were never implemented for both financial reasons as well as the necessary structural changes that would only reach fulfilment from an integrated vision from FET and adult education. Similarly, Coolahan did not articulate in much detail in Chapter 17 the impact that the contribution from European Commission, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) had on the educational debate with publications such as a *White Paper: Teaching and Learning Towards the Learning Society (1995)* and *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All (1996)*. Perhaps this may have been because Coolahan had served as Ireland's vice-president of the OECD committee as well as facilitator and contributor to many educational discussion documents.

John Coolahan wrote in Chapter 17 that 'the onset of the recession in 2008 may have helped to concentrate minds and have led to the overhaul of existing provision'. As an educational practitioner, this one short sentence, buried in the heart of a paragraph does not, in my opinion, convey the important turning point of this occurrence, resulting in significant structural changes within the FET and adult education sector. In a time of economic crisis FET was challenged to re-build a stable economy and society. In 2013 under the leadership of Ruairi Quinn, T.D., Minister for Education and Skills, 33 VEC's were replaced by 16 Education and Training Boards, thus bringing together areas of education and training formerly under the remit of a number of government departments, particularly apprenticeships previously under the remit of the national training agency, FÁS. Also established in 2013 was An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS), the National Further Education and Training Authority with responsibility for overseeing and facilitating the delivery of integrated FET. These FET changes Coolahan describes as broadly analogous to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in higher education. A final aspect of change referred to is the introduction of a Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), an integrated approach to collecting data on FET programme outputs, outcomes and performance. The challenge in gathering data within the FET and adult education sector lies in what is measured and what is measurable in the context of lifelong learning.

Despite his retirement in 2004 John Coolahan continued with his contributions to Irish education and was a significant, influential and pivotal figure in enabling many of the changes in both thinking and policy within the Irish educational system. While substantial and some would say monumental educational changes have taken place between the publication of Coolahan's first book in 1981 and his last book in 2017, particularly in the FET and adult education sector, one phenomenon remained the same, the dedication written within both books

For my wife, Mary. Ní fheicimid a leithéidí le linn arís

Book Review: No Artificial Limits: Ireland's Regional Technical Colleges

RICHARD THORN

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, 2018

ISBN 978-1-910393-20-8

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH RYAN

In the exceptionally high warm summer days of mid July 2018 Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD and three other members of his Cabinet signalled publicly that the first technological university comprising the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Institute of Technology Tallaght, and the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, was to be designated following an evaluation and recommendation of an international peer evaluation panel. The announcement marked a signal day in the life of the technological sector and gave effect to one of the principal landscape recommendations in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* which had been published in 2011. It is fitting that such a significant enhancement of the Irish higher education landscape has coincided with the publication by the Institute of Public Administration of Richard Thorn's insightful account of the history of the country's regional technical colleges. Dr Thorn's eminently readable volume speaks of a passion for the sector and attests considerable research which undoubtedly benefited from his direct experience as policy maker and institutional leader.

This is a very readable book and can be approached equally by the education insider or by any person interested in the evolution of education in Ireland. It is related with characteristic wittiness and an easy style that makes of this more of an informed and engaging story than a forbidding study. Thorn traces through in detail the evolution of the sector from the age of massification in higher education in the 1960s until the cusp of the creation of the technological universities mentioned above. He records the almost eightfold increase in enrolments to higher education in a period of four decades covered within this account. The book revels in the personalities and the political intrigues and we are close enough to the period to have afforded the author direct contact with many of the principal actors. The account, for example, of the delay in opening

the Galway Regional Technical College recorded by its inaugural principal, Gay Corr, that had been occasioned by the untimely death of the horse that was to pull the cart intended to supply this promising new high-tech institution is told with relish. It is characteristic of the humour that informs the book and it pithily captures the prevailing self-effacing character of the sector as a whole.

Thorn's account brings us to the foothills of the current situation. He leads us to the gestation of the technological universities but stops short of engaging with the current landscape. It is reasonable to argue that historical analysis requires some little perspective. But he does deal with the as yet unresolved funding debate up to the time of writing in mid-2017. This allows him to record some personal comments on the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* and its implementation. The reader will find it telling when the author chooses to assume the mantle of the critical commentator. His opening remarks are succinct and perceptive while the corresponding closing remarks betray something of the passionate campaigner in their call for longer-term and more strategic planning. Thorn also employs the opportunity to register his reservations over the merger criterion attaching to the creation of technological universities. One fear he voices is that of distraction; that institutions with a proven record in educating people with a focus on the workplace, with a close-to-market emphasis in their focused research endeavours, and not least with close ties to their own communities, might be in danger of loosening these core commitments and drifting from the shared mission that has characterised the technological sector for half a century.

The emergence of a defined technological sector that finds its roots in the 1967 report of the Steering Committee on Technical Education provided essentially, in Thorn's phrase, a missing rung in Irish education. This shift to upskilling and inclusion echoed a broader international movement centred on expanding vocationally oriented institutions to become higher education providers outside of the traditional university space. The consequences have been dramatic and various; from humble beginnings the sector has grown to 14 regional institutions, and the cumulative impact on individual lives, on the sustainability of regions, and on the economy, has been profound. Another result has been a distinctive Irish response to the predictable debate around the optimum construct for a system of higher education; over recent decades we have examined international exemplars and considered binary and comprehensive systems but policy has eventually realised a diversified model that is singularly Irish and one that attracts significant intentional attention

for our espousal of a complementary but diverse mission construction. For anyone interested in that evolution, a curious mixture of careful planning and happenstance, Thorn's book is an invaluable contribution to charting the progress and colouring in the context.

In switching voice, albeit momentarily, from narrator to advocate, Thorn highlights again the value to the Irish society and economy of the maintenance of a diversified system, one that provides channels for all and at differing times through their lives. He highlights that this has been the sector for access and for support of the adult learner. That our system of higher education must be dynamic and ever changing is attested repeatedly and not least through the considerable development chronicled in this concise record. That it holds faithful to the fundamental tenets of flexibility, inclusiveness, and relevance to the requirements of society and economy is Thorn's fundamental parting message and one that is echoed by generations of alumni and the many who labour currently to enhance and promote the opportunities provided through this vibrant technological sector.

The Adult Learner Journal 2019

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS AS THE VOICE OF ADULT LEARNING

About the Journal

The Adult Learner, the Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education was founded in the mid-1980s. This valuable resource documents the growth and development of adult learning policy and practice.

2019 Edition

In 2019 AONTAS will celebrate 50 years as the voice of adult learning, established in 1969. To mark this very important milestone we will be publishing a very special edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* which will be launched at the AONTAS Annual General Meeting in May 2019.

The purpose of the journal is to highlight developments in the sector and to comment on and debate important issues arising.

The 2019 edition of *The Adult Learner* will reflect upon changes in the field of adult, further and community education in Ireland, across Europe, and globally over the past 50 years. To do this the 2019 edition of *The Adult Learner* will reflect upon the work of AONTAS in this time as well as the impact of *The Adult Learner* itself since its first publication in 1985.