

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Could Ireland's internationalisation policy reshape future ELT curricula?

by Touria Jouilla McKee

In 2014, the Irish government released a policy statement entitled 'Regulatory Reform of the International Education Sector and the Student Immigration Regime' (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, online). For English Language course providers, analysing the reform's framework in the context of learning outcomes and Ireland's economic strategy is essential to fully comprehend the policy's role in the enactment of the new system, since these two constituents are the most relevant in the operational changes emanating from the policy implementation strategy (QQI, n.d., pp. 13-16) at both organisational and inter-organisational levels.



The road to internationalisation

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The focus on English as a global language in Ireland's International Education Strategy exemplifies the interface between global influences and local educational domains, which is why the nature of courses offered by EL course providers merits future restructuring in terms of the potential it can offer in the Irish labour market. This article seeks to raise awareness of possible educational futures for private and small EL course providers and the scope for the adaptation of learning programmes that could create meaningful educational prospects for a thriving international student market in which globalisation continues to play a significant role in shaping FE (Further Education) and HE (Higher Education) landscapes.

Globalisation, the concept of power and the future of education requirements for EL learners.

Globalisation has long been rooted in schooling and education reform policies, which are largely influenced by supranational changes in economic and educational trends, informing the way governments focus their attention on global competitiveness. The revenues generated by international education in Ireland are characteristic of a capitalist approach partly shaped by cross-border access among nations, and so are aligned with Ireland's open economic policy.

Ball (1998) eloquently discusses globalisation as a determiner that guides policymaking and drives change to address dilemmas within education systems. Olssen (2004) also refers to economic globalisation and its role in creating a surging flow of services across the globe, contributing to a more capitalist world order and the continuous demand for English instruction in all education disciplines and across international borders. This gives credence to the value of English Language skills in the job market, and so it would make sense to revamp the way English is taught in private and FE institutions in Ireland.

In the current digital age, Ireland is among the top destinations attracting international students and striving to increase economic growth by promoting EL and higher education. In this context,



The whole world in our hands

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globalisation is the embodiment of power-knowledge ideologies that shape higher education today. The concept of power is evident in Ireland's implementation of the new ELT reform strategy, particularly in maintaining the state's position among global markets and trends. This is voiced in the Irish education minister's statement, Richard Burton. Referring to the international education strategy for Ireland 2016-2020, he states that:

"The international education sector is currently worth approximately €1.58bn per annum to the Irish economy and I

have set targets for the period of this Strategy to see this grow to €2.1bn per annum by 2020." (Department of Education & Skills, n.d., p. 5, online).

International students: a promising economic commodity

The economic value of international education reached an output of €1.55 billion in 2016 (Ireland Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.7, online); a figure that surpassed earlier predictions in the 2010-2015 government strategy, wherein the value of the international education sector was 'expected to enhance the economic impact of international education by some €300 million, to approximately €1.2 billion in total' (High-Level Group on International Education, 2010, online, p. 13). The provision of education for FE and HE in Ireland today is, in many respects, characteristic of contemporary education policy dualism combining individual development, (in the case of enforcing learner protection laws and formative assessment, for example) and national economic gains, a concept articulated by Ball (1998), which mirrors the current government orthodoxy in which educational policy is largely guided by the prospects of enhancing knowledge and skills to boost employment rates.

Issues surrounding symbolic power and linguistic capital for international students.

When we consider the rise in student numbers in Ireland in the past few years, it seems appropriate to invoke Bourdieu's view on symbolic power and policy languages which create a paradigm in which language capital provides credibility and power.

Bourdieu (1992) suggests that linguistic capital sets the narrow parameters within which narratives bear a higher currency. Bourdieu does not offer a solution for the dominance of linguistic capital, but highlights its commodity in educational, political and economic spheres.

If we consider the changes in ELT academic practices, we find that regulatory QQI (Quality Qualifications Ireland) guidelines explicitly emphasise accountability measures in areas such as course assessment, evidence of student feedback mechanisms, student support & protection and learning outcomes, all of which are measurable and have been under strict quality evaluation by QQI. While this is a leap forward toward a more regulated ELT industry, the

presence of symbolic power manifests itself in the role of English proficiency, which allows international students to seek opportunities in the Irish job market. Not surprisingly, we soon realise that the correlation between learning outcomes and language as a commodity is evinced in the Irish reform strategy, as it reflects the theory of linguistic capital. Within the context of internationalisation, linguistic competence is a currency that leads to better higher education prospects and career advancement for international students.

But what does this mean for international students enrolled on EL courses?

Upon completing their EL courses, international students are faced with the task of finding suitable progression paths toward academic or professional development. The transition from EL learning to HE or employment can pose issues when students face new learning environments and what we could refer to as “environmental languages”. In other words, students find themselves in unfamiliar educational or professional settings that operate systems, skills and language that students have yet to learn. For those new to HE and the labour market in Ireland, there are several skills to consider, such as study skills, research methods or industry-specific knowledge (for those seeking employment upon completing EL courses). Such factors are among many that exemplify the concept of power knowledge and its effects on students’ progress. Historically, universities were predicted to use power to shape citizens into skilled workforces that would enable nations to keep up with globalisation changes and economic competition. In his interviews and writings, Foucault (1980) explains the relationship between the classification and compartmentalisation of educational practices and roles to build suitable citizens that would propel economic growth and knowledge through regimented educational reforms.

In looking at ideological theories reflected in education policy implementation, we begin to conceptualise policies’ role within economic and power-driven concepts. Foucault states that in the context of population management, power-knowledge is manifested in a web of relations: ‘In reality, power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations’ (Foucault, 180, p.198). In this sense, Foucault’s analysis of power and education is timely when looking into the ELT reform implementation. The introduction of mandatory end-of-course formative assessment in Irish ELT institutions reflects the state’s vision to attract, as the policy report puts it, ‘international talent’ (page 1). Therefore, students that are likely to progress on to higher education present a more rewarding economic asset for the state, especially with the spread of English as a global economic medium.

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What about the student's prospects?

Ireland is looking to increase research commercialisation and capacity to equip graduates to compete in the global market, thus it makes sense to consider alternative courses that complement this strategy. In most EL centres, whether they operate independently or within larger entities, English is taught in the form of General English or ‘exam-specific’ formats leading to an end-of-course formative examination. Other centres offer more specialised foundation programmes leading to progression on to employment or HE. While this equips students with the language skills they need to integrate into society, it does not always open avenues for them to enter the job market. English

Language courses offer students the opportunity to interact with the language in relevant contexts. It serves as a strong means toward integration in Irish society. However, upon completion of EL courses, many students still struggle to reach the fluency needed to embark on a degree course, apply for high-paying professions or be considered for posts in which language proficiency is a necessity.

While international students are a great commodity for Ireland, the nature of EL courses available could benefit from alternative curricula that support current trends and visions for educational futures. The future of education in Ireland is predicted to see a rising number of international students, with a range of skills and knowledge likely to boost the Irish economy. If institutions catered for more specialised courses, this would set students on a more promising trajectory in the way of securing brighter prospects.

A more successful model, closely linked to tangible learning outcomes and employment prospects, is seen in the UK's ESOL Skills For Life curricula, which combined English language input with life skills, ranging in themes and contexts that responded to learners' needs to seek higher education opportunities and develop practical skills leading to employment. A similar model is seen in Irish community colleges and HE institutions that offer Entry to Employment courses, Bridging Programmes or Access to HE diplomas.

How can we consider alternative course structures and content for future curricula?

The Irish regulatory policy document consistently refers to the value of education and quality assurance and lists a series of changes in respect of student services and compliance with immigration laws. An extension of these changes reflecting learning outcomes is detailed in the Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines document by QQI (Quality Qualifications Ireland) (QQI, 2016, online).

QQI guidelines, which offer resources for implementation based on the European context through the EQAVET (The European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training) framework, offer a comprehensive outline of course QA, governance and policies which several providers are in the process of implementing to achieve programme validation (QQI, n.d., p.5).

For providers already in possession of, or progressing toward, QQI approval for accredited courses, it could be worth considering alternative programmes such as those offered by state providers and FE/ HE institutions. Although the possibilities of developing new curricula may seem like a herculean task, it may well be necessary to develop alternative course content and outcomes alongside ESL in the next few years. Of course, the inception and implementation of course proposals of this nature would require arduous work and research, nonetheless it is a model that has proven to benefit students and providers in the past. We see this in institutions already offering Springboard, Access and Bridging programmes. There is also a range of foundation programmes for students wishing to embark on a Master's degree or seek employment through vocational diploma pathways in various sectors. Although EL institutions operate outside the scope of courses of this nature, the prospect of research into the

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future of EL programmes is one that is not entirely unfeasible, particularly since it would complement recent internationalisation policies and government provisions.

Since most visa-required students in private ESL education enrol for long-term programmes, by the time they approach the end of their permitted language tuition, which can last for 2 years, they may require more than formative EL examinations to be fully ready for HE or employment. If students could avail of EL courses that offer life skills, bridging courses or entry to employment programmes, it would be far more fulfilling to develop accredited programmes that would allow this to happen. This presents possible alternative futures for course providers catering to international students. Given the continuous changing landscape of education in Ireland and the advent in technology through globalisation, the future of EL education for international adult learners is likely to require the revamping of course content and prospects for future course participants.

Conclusion

The implementation of alternative ESL programmes is not the focus of this paper, as several factors would need to be considered, such as funding, course design, educational resources, programme validation & approval...etc. Nonetheless, the initiation of a discourse for educational futures among Irish ESL providers could soon arise amid the rapidly changing landscape of education for international students in Ireland. It is also worth pointing out that a reassessment of courses currently offered by institutions would have a positive influence on teachers and academic professionals, since alternative ESL educational content and outcomes could open new avenues for EL language educators, managers and directors in areas such as research and continuous professional development, which would feed back into the quality of potential innovative learning programmes and learning outcomes.

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