

Title	Book Review: Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-Primary Education in Ireland, edited by Professor Judith Harford
Item Type	book review
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Citation	Hall, Tony (2018) Book Review: Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-Primary Education in Ireland, Edited by Prof. Judith Harford, Peter Lang Publishers, 247 pages. Irish Educational Studies, 1-5. doi: 10.1080/03323315.2018.1545683
DOI	10.1080/03323315.2018.1545683
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Rights	CC BY-NC-ND
Download date	2026-10-09 02:05:14
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/14656

Book Review: Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-Primary Education in Ireland

Edited by Prof. Judith Harford
Peter Lang Publishers, 247 pages

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In July 1963, An Taoiseach, Seán Lemass appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* with the title, "Ireland: New Spirit in the Auld Sod".

It was international recognition of the dynamism with which the Lemass Government was pursuing an agenda of change and modernisation in Ireland at that time. Among Lemass' accomplishments, one was the appointment of Donogh O'Malley as Minister of Education, in a political portfolio that now had real importance and status in the emerging modern Ireland.

Lemass and progressive contemporaries, like T.K. Whitaker, understood the importance of education and educational opportunity - beyond primary level - in developing Ireland as a modern state, with a well-educated and skilled citizenry. On September 10th, 1966, the Minister would make the historic declaration of free second level education, (including free school transport), a decision that resounds to this day; as Prof. Dermot Keogh has said, "Free education was liberation for an entire generation of Irish school children, and successive generations". (O'Mórdha, 2000)

Over 50 years on, the commissioned book: *Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-Primary Education in Ireland*, edited by Prof. Judith Harford, is a most timely, incisive and comprehensive review of Minister Donogh O'Malley's visionary and historic policy announcement: its background, contemporary impact and ensuing legacy.

As well as its nuanced and compelling narrative on the provenance and legacy of the free second-level education scheme, the book is itself a landmark collection of the voices and perspectives of leading figures in Irish education. It adds new, critical insight and analysis of previously unexamined primary source material, which deepens our understanding of the 1960s, (and 1966-1967 especially), as a pivotal period in the history of Irish education.

This book is no mere hagiographic retrospective, however, and the question in the title sets up the rich and compelling discourse, as the editor and contributing authors examine critically how the scheme initially emerged, and how it has formatively influenced key dimensions of Irish history and the history of Irish education – social, infrastructural, curricular and political - from the announcement of free second-level education in September 1966 to the present day.

The collection opens with a foreword by Prof. J.J. Lee, which sets the scene for the monograph as a whole, illustrating how the introduction of the free

education scheme had a profound, transformative impact on Irish education and society, raising Irish young people's aspirations to participate in education beyond primary level. The preamble points to how the introduction of free second-level education constituted a most significant moment in the development of Ireland as a modern, sovereign state.

Prof. Judith Harford's introduction provides a succinct, fluent and penetrating overview of the key issues and themes raised by the book, J.J. Lee noting in his Foreword: "The editor has selected her contributors shrewdly, with chapter after chapter repaying not only reading, but rereading and deep reflection, while her pungently compact introduction provides so admirable a guide to the contents that it would be trying to gild the lily to seek to summarize it." (Lee, 2018, x)

In Chapter 1, Prof. Tom O'Donoghue outlines and interrogates key aspects of context, and drawing on trends in patterns of school attendance, contests *three invented traditions* about participation in Irish education, leading up to the introduction of the free second level education scheme. This provides the reader insightful, previously unexamined perspectives on the wider context and impact of the introduction of the free second-level education scheme. Further, the discussion highlights class barriers that continued to constrain participation in education, post-1967.

In Chapter 2, Prof. Áine Hyland provides a compelling first-hand account – as one of the architects of the introduction of free secondary education – of the formative work of the *Investment in Education* team (from 1962-1964), which provided Dr Patrick Hillery George Colley, and their successor, Donogh O'Malley, with the critical research base to argue for, and ultimately introduce, free-second level education.

Reading the book, and especially this chapter now, in the contemporary moment and the importance placed on evidence-based research, it is inspiring. It details how research can provide "consequential evidence" (Barab & Squire, 2004, 2), which can lead to truly foundational, systemic educational change.

Profs. Harford and Dr. Fleming's chapter stands out as a key chapter in the book, providing for the first time an incisive analysis of the key agents involved in brokering the free education scheme. They crucially discuss the complexity and confluence of key factors that aligned, and also the importance of Minister O'Malley's predecessors, An Taoiseach Seán Lemass, and key public servants, in promulgating free second-level education. The chapter furthermore highlights the importance of leadership in translating policy into practice. It illustrates how advocacy and agency together proved critical in challenging the prevailing conservatism of the time, to bring essential reform to education, a historically conservative area of government in Ireland.

In Chapter 4, Prof. John Coolahan situates the discussion in the context of the then *moribund* educational system, prior to 1966-1967. Critically and compellingly, he examines broader implications of the introduction of the free second-level education scheme, including initial teacher education and syllabus reform. As well as the direct and indirect benefits to Irish education and society,

Prof. Coolahan underscores the importance of the related free transport scheme in practically supporting Irish children to attend and stay on at the post-primary level. As the chapter outlines, the yellow-topped buses and developing school transport network did much to support regional development in Ireland. Echoing a central theme of the book as a whole, Prof. Coolahan concludes with the Minister's awareness that even with the support of free fees, books and transport, economic inequality would still prevail negatively upon participation in education in Ireland.

In Chapter 5, Prof. D.G. Mulcahy highlights how the many-sided or holistic development of the person has arguably been neglected in the post-primary curriculum since the introduction of free-second level education. The chapter is a most timely, conceptual and philosophical examination of the aims of curriculum and the importance of reconsidering the need for a new and balanced, general education ontology. It furthermore shows how the introduction of Leaving Certificate subjects in *applied* areas, such as physical education, and the proper esteem now being accorded these subjects within the Senior Cycle in Ireland, creates significant potential. As the author rightly concludes, it is opportune – and indeed would be an appropriate way to celebrate the historic introduction of the free second-level education scheme – by revisiting and implementing the aims and aspirations of a balanced, practical-theoretical curriculum in Irish education.

Following Chapter 5's critical and insightful consideration of curriculum post-1967, Prof. Emer Smyth returns the reader to a fundamental, key question and issue concerning educational inequality, and whether 'free education' is sufficient to address this effectively. As outlined elsewhere in the book, Minister O'Malley was aware that – notwithstanding the implementation and systematisation of his historic policy – certain social groups would still find participation in education difficult and problematic. Chapter 6 makes a pivotal contribution to the narrative of the book, especially concerning our understanding of the complexities of individual social-class background and school social mix, furthermore highlighting the challenges of creating truly equitable schools.

Chapter 7 by Prof. Kathleen Lynch and Dr. Margaret Crean expands our critical understanding of the challenges faced in the implementation of a transformative innovation such as free-second level education; and that notwithstanding achievements in Irish education since the introduction of the free second-level education scheme in 1966-1967, social class inequalities remain. As Minister O'Malley himself understood, economic inequality needed to be challenged and overcome, if free second-level education was truly, inclusively to achieve its goals. This chapter crucially highlights how a meritocratic view is insufficient, and indeed naïve; what is in fact required is a principled approach to educational reform, one predicated on equality of condition in society as a whole. Concluding with a series of key questions, this chapter should prompt all interested in education to reflect and consider critically the paradigmatic assumptions that need to be challenged, truly to support education for all.

In Chapter 8, Tom Boland traces the relationship between the introduction of free second-level education and the development and expansion of a tertiary education sector in Ireland, specifically the emergence of the Regional Technical Colleges (now the Institutes of Technology). The contemporary economic imperatives and societal developments that underpinned the growth of third-level education in Ireland are outlined, as well as the key role of the European Union in developing Ireland's emerging tertiary education sector. This is a further insightful chapter of the book, which adds to the overall narrative by exploring, and reflecting on how free-second level education potentially impacted upon the broader social context, as well as the emerging third-level education sector in Ireland. The chapter concludes with important insights regarding the role of Irish higher education today.

In Chapter 9, Prof. Jim Gleeson provides a most interesting reflection on the free second-level education scheme, and related introduction of the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA). By exploring key historical antecedents, and the Interim CEB (Curriculum and Examinations Board), the predecessor of the NCCA, the chapter critically locates our understanding of how curriculum in Ireland has developed since the introduction of the free second-level education scheme, and in particular the statutory role and participatory approach of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) today. This chapter makes for essential reading, particularly in understanding the provenance and development of curricular development and innovation in Ireland since the introduction of the free second level education scheme in 1966-1967.

Chapter 10 provides a fitting and thought-provoking conclusion to the book, situating the impact of the introduction of the free second-level scheme in the context of the changing ethos in Irish schools, particularly the role of religious, school leadership and the emergence of a teaching profession in Ireland. Drawing from analysis of the history of teacher professionalism in Ireland, Prof. Ciaran Sugrue critically conceptualises the notion of professional responsibility of educators today, which can serve as a clarion call to assume responsibility - individually and collectively - to advocate for education, as a fitting legacy for the vision of Minister Donogh O'Malley.

Having announced the introduction of the free second-level education scheme, Minister O'Malley remarked to the media that "The word radical was not in my mind when I framed these proposals, which I have just announced in the Dáil; I am a realist and I had to deal with the crying needs of our young children who thirst for education so much." (O'Mórdha, 2000)

The introduction of the free second-level education scheme radically altered the history and progress of Irish education, and remains one of the most momentous policy developments in Irish history.

This book stands as a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of this landmark development in Irish educational history, and indeed the history of the Irish State. Further, it helps us to reflect critically on Ireland's educational past, hopefully to inform productively Ireland's educational future. It should make for essential reading for all interested in Irish education, and in educational reform more broadly. The book can be read as a coherent whole, or each chapter can be

read as a standalone contribution, deepening our insight of key dimensions – social, infrastructural, curricular and political – of one of Ireland’s most historic educational reforms. It represents a very important and timely collection, assembling critical, engaging and insightful analyses of developments leading up to, and following a pivotal period in Irish educational history, when Minister Donogh O’Malley took that remarkable and historic decision to announce national, free second-level education directly to the media in September 1966.

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