Ireland

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Demographic Background

Ireland is a small country. Our total population is under four million.

Currently, about 41% of school leavers go directly into higher education. Ten years ago the comparable figure was less than 35%. Of those who complete the Leaving Certificate, about 65% enter higher education. The overall age cohort participation rate is around 50%. This reflects the very substantial expansion of higher education over the last three decades.

Table 1.
Number of Full Time Students by Sector 1965/66 to 1997/98

Type of Institution	1965/66	1980/81	1997/98
Universities	16,000	26,000	61,000
Institutes of Technology	1,000	11,000	42,000
Specialist Teacher Education & Other	1,700	3,000	1,200
Total	**18,700**	**40,000**	**104,000**

Within those numbers there are other dramatic changes. Female students now outnumber males, in contrast to 1965/66 when they formed less than half the student population. Technological education barely existed in 1965/66; now it accounts for over 40% of all students. New fields of study have opened up and new methods of course delivery have been developed.

Demand for higher education places still outstrips supply, so entry is highly competitive for very many courses. The school leaver age cohort is now starting to decline, but the Leaving Certificate completion rate is still increasing, so the pool of potential students will remain large. Nonetheless, the age cohort participation rate is projected to grow to 60% by the year 2010.

Some International Comparisons

The tables below provide some insight into how higher education in Ireland compares to other OECD countries. There is also a table showing some European Union comparisons.

Table 2 shows the percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 in 1996 who had completed tertiary and upper secondary education in OECD countries. Our ranking in this indicator reflects the low level of educational investment in Ireland up to 30 years ago.

Table 2
Educational Attainment of Population Aged 25-64 in 1996

	Highest Completed Level of Education			
	Tertiary		**Upper Secondary**	
OECD average (unweighted)	23%		40%	
Ireland	23%		28%	
Ireland's ranking	8th		21st	
Number of countries	26		26	
Countries in the top quarter				
	Canada	48	Czech Rep.	74
	US	34	Austria	63
	Sweden	27	Poland	61
	Norway	27	Germany	60
	New Zealand	25	Switzerland	58
	Australia	25	Norway	55

Source: OECD (1998), Education at a Glance, *Paris, p. 43.*

The position improves if we examine younger age cohorts, reflecting the expansion of higher education. Table 3 shows that in the younger age cohort we are now above the OECD average and rank in the top seven countries.

Table 3.
Third Level Attainment of Population Aged 25-34 and 35-44 in 1995

	Age Cohort	
	25-34	**35-44**
OECD country mean	23%	22%
Ireland	27%	21%
Number of countries	25	24
Countries in the top quarter:		
Canada[1]	53%	49%
US	34%	m
Belgium	33%	
Norway	32%	33%
Korea	29%	
Sweden	29%	32%
Australia		28%
New Zealand		28%
Germany		27%

Source: OECD (1997), Education at a Glance, *Paris, p. 40. (1997* EAG *used in absence of comparable data in 1998 version)*

Table 4 shows the continuing rapid rise in higher education participation in the younger age groups which will raise the educational attainment of the population over time. The educational attainment of the population in other EU countries is also rising.

Students in Ireland are relatively young compared to other OECD countries, with a median age of new entrants at 18.6 years, compared with 20.5 years for the OECD country mean. Only about 5% of full-time entrants are mature students, *i.e.* over 23 years. Less than 20% of students are part-time, but most of these are mature students. It is difficult to make international comparisons in this area, because many countries do not distinguish between full-time and part-time students in their statistics.

[1] Canada's definition of "third-level" includes elements which in Ireland and other OECD countries are classified as "further education".

Table 4.
Percentage of People with Higher Education Qualifications in EU Countries Between the Ages of 25 and 34, 1996 and 1997

Age	Ireland		EU Average		Ireland's Ranking	
	1996	**1997**	**1996**	**1997**	**1996**	**1997**
25	38 6	36.2	19.0	20.4	1st	1st
26	35.8	34.6	20.0	21.4	1st	3rd
27	35.6	34.4	21.0	21.6	1st	2nd
28	31.0	33.6	20.9	21.6	2nd	2nd
29	30.5	31.3	21.5	21.8	2nd	2nd
30	28.9	31.1	21.6	22.5	3rd	2nd
31	28.8	29.0	21.5	22.0	3rd	4th
32	27.7	28.3	21.4	21.9	4th	3rd
33	28.1	27.7	20.9	21.6	3rd	3rd
34	26.0	25.8	20.8	22.0	4th	7th
25-34	31.2	31.2	20.9	21.7	2nd	2nd

Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (1996 and 1997). Margins of error for single year of age category greater than for age group 25-34.

Implications for Physical Planning

The very rapid growth in student numbers puts enormous strain on higher education buildings and equipment, particularly as much of the period of expansion coincided with severe restrictions on public expenditure. Colleges have been struggling to keep up, using a variety of mechanisms to meet the most urgent academic needs. Many temporary and prefabricated buildings went up and non-academic facilities, such as sports halls, catering and recreational services, fell well behind in the queue. In recent years, much headway has been made in these areas and the most acute needs have been met. There is still, however, a very substantial backlog of remedial and modernisation work to be done.

The challenge of financing such developments has led to diversification in the funding mechanisms for buildings. Sources include:

- Direct Exchequer funding (including EU, ERDF, EFTA, EIB etc).
- Indirect Exchequer funding through tax-based schemes.
- Private donors.
- Borrowing.
- Student levies (*e.g.* for sports and recreational facilities).
- College "own resources", (*e.g.* economic fees from non-EU students).

It is likely that public private partnerships will feature in the future.

Increasingly, as well, buildings are provided as part of an overall government programme to which colleges are asked to respond, as opposed to initiatives coming from colleges themselves. The programmatic approach has both risks and benefits; either way it is likely to stay with us. Recent major initiatives have included programmes to increase output in areas of identified skills shortages (one predominantly in hardware engineering and the other in software engineering). A major injection of capital funds has also been secured to build up the research infrastructure of higher education institutions. This was a very highly competitive process and successful institutions received very substantial funding.

For the future, demands on buildings will continue to be heavy, but their nature will change. The decline in school-leaver numbers, and the increased emphasis on adult and continuing education, will lead to a rise in "non-standard" provision within a system that has, to date, been rather rigid. Greater numbers of part-time (day and evening) students and of distance learning students will inevitable affect the design and use of space. The speed of technological developments and their impact on learning methodologies must also be factored in. To quote from a recent publication: "The question is, not how useful is the computer in the classroom, but is the classroom any use at all in the age of the computer?"

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