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***Towards the era of lifelong learning: A history of Irish education  
1800–2016***

John Coolahan (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration; 2017;  
ISBN: 978-1-910393-18-5; 352 pp; €20)

The first edition of John Coolahan's *Irish Education: History and Structure*, covering the period from 1800 to 1980, was published by the Institute of Public Administration in 1981. The fact that there were twelve reprints in subsequent years testifies to the enduring quality and continued relevance of this invaluable source. However, since 1980 there have been many varied and significant developments in the education system and thankfully Coolahan was recently in a position to update the first edition, now with a revised title which reflects the current nature of Irish education.

Over his career, Coolahan has taught at first- and second-level schools, lectured in a college of education and a university, and become Professor Emeritus of Education at Maynooth University. In addition, he has been centrally involved in a range of education issues and developments at national level. Coolahan has played a key role in national policy formulation and has been involved in some significant developments. For example, he was Secretary General and Chief Rapporteur of the historic National Education Convention held at Dublin Castle in 1993. The significance of the convention was that, for the first time, representatives of the various stakeholders in Irish education, such as the Church, teachers' unions, parents, boards of management and senior departmental officials, had come together in a consultation process which achieved considerable consensus on key issues. He was also Chairman and Rapporteur of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, established in 2011, which considered how best to progress the growing demand of parents for greater choice regarding school ethos in a situation where over 90

per cent of the 3,200 primary schools were under Catholic patronage. Because of his unrivalled experience as educator, researcher, policy analyst, policy advisor and international consultant, Coolahan is in a unique position to have undertaken this work on the evolution of the Irish education system.

The book is presented in three sections. Part I deals with the evolution of the principal pillars of Irish education – primary, second level and third level – in the period 1800–1960. Coolahan points out that the contents of Part I have successfully stood the test of time and were therefore maintained in the reconceptualised version of the 1981 edition. Given the breadth of this historical period it is of interest to note that many cornerstone developments of the current system were introduced in the pre-independence era and that, with the exception of the Vocational Education Act, 1930, there were few changes to the key features of the education pillars in the decades following independence. It was not until the 1960s that significant changes occurred.

Part II covers educational developments in a period of significant policy change from 1960 to 1980 and, in addition to chapters dealing with each of the main pillars, includes chapters on special education, adult education and teacher education. Part II contains considerable amendments to the 1981 edition. Coolahan describes this period as both remarkable and a watershed in Irish education. He notes that there was an increased emphasis on education as an economic investment rather than a consumer service. Many of the noteworthy developments of this period, which witnessed the first increase in population since the mid nineteenth century, stemmed from the findings of the 1966 *Education in Investment* report, which was undertaken by the Department of Education in cooperation with the OECD.

Part III deals with the education system from 1980 to 2016. It is almost as long as Parts I and II combined and, in an overview chapter, Coolahan has subdivided the period into three distinctive phases. In addition to chapters on the main pillars, as in Part II, there are also chapters on early childhood education and the school inspectorate. The overview of this period gives a good indication of the complex evolution of the education system at different levels. It highlights how educational policy and practice is, and has been, affected and influenced by the changing politico-economic structure of society. At one level, the difficulties of sustaining policy continuity are highlighted by the frequent changes in ministers of education. At another level,

challenges and modifications to the historic role and influence of the churches, especially at first and second level, arising from societal change, are evident. Yet again, the growing demand for further education led to a greatly expanded higher education sector with many attendant issues.

The 1980–2016 period is characterised by a plethora of reports, Green Papers, White Papers, discussions, proposals and consultations among relevant interests. Coolahan charts how some developments progressed while others were not sustained, how some proposals were developed and implemented while others were shelved. In all, however, the period was one where, despite economic and other setbacks, the Irish education system began to be transformed to one almost unrecognisable from that which existed only a few decades earlier. For example, Coolahan records a growing emphasis on the concept of lifelong learning, an emphasis on early childhood education and the needs of particular groups such as those living in disadvantaged areas, those with learning difficulties and mature students. Another feature of this period is the extent to which the Department of Education, long criticised for having an overly centralised role, was gradually divested of some of its functions to agencies such as the State Examinations Commission in order to allow it to concentrate more fully on policy formulation and implementation. In the context of the devolution of the department's functions, it is noted that a potentially most significant move – the establishment of regional education boards to cover the administration of first- and second-level schools, proposed in a Green Paper in 1985 – did not proceed. This period also saw the introduction of various pieces of legislation, notably the Irish Universities Act of 1997 and the comprehensive Education Act of 1998.

One measure of the overall impact of developments is the extent to which participation in education has increased. Coolahan touches on this in part. For example, he highlights the rise in numbers at second level following on from the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967. Similarly, he notes that the number of full-time students at third level quadrupled in the period from 1979 to 2009 (from 39,000 to 165,000).

At the end of each chapter in Part I is a chronological list of the relevant key events and reports on the aspect of education under consideration. This provides a most useful summary but it has not been followed through in the chapters of Parts II and III. However,

this is compensated for by the inclusion of excellent introductory overview chapters for both Parts II and III. The text is supported by an extensive bibliography which, not surprisingly, contains many sources on diverse aspects of education attributed to Coolahan.

The Irish education system has been shaped by a number of influences, whether political, cultural, religious, economic or societal. Coolahan's book, written with great clarity, admirably and succinctly, illustrates the interaction between these influences and it is likely to long remain the authoritative work on the evolution of the Irish education system.

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