

iScoil: The History and Background of an Online Alternative to Early School Leaving in Ireland

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International research describes education as a powerful tool by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully as citizens (Unesco, 2014). Education as a proven route out of poverty is also recognized in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, a recent Irish government report that aims to co-ordinate policy across Government departments by identifying areas that have the potential to improve outcomes for children and young people (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). Shown below, the second outcome prioritized in the report is to ensure that young people are getting the best foundation in learning and development, have social and emotional wellbeing, and are engaged in and achieving in education (DCYA, 2014).

2 Outcome 2: Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development

The potential societal and economic impact of developing a coordinated response to early school leaving is considered a key investment not only in the prospects of individuals but

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: IMPACT ON SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

- Welfare payments €12,300 per annum over the life course of one male early school leaver
- Lost tax revenue €17,000
- Health services- greater expenditure but not quantified in any study. However it is well known that education is a key social determinant of health People with lower levels of education are likely to die younger and experience poorer health than people with higher educational achievement levels.
- Estimated €280 million per annum in crime costs could be saved by keeping children in school (ESRI, 2009).

also in the future prosperity of a European economy (European Commission, 2011).

A Department of Education report on school leavers in Ireland shows almost 4,500 children a year drop out of school between the first year and transition year of secondary education (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). The figures for those who left during the 2009-10 school year show more than 1,500 children progressed no further than first or second year A further 1,777 who entered third year in 2009 were not at school a year later, while 1,064 ended school during or after transition year but before Leaving Certificate (DES, 2013).

The causes of early school leaving are complex, often the outcome of multiple factors including personal experiences, family situation, social and economic context as well as the school environment. As a result it is generally recognized that education systems are often not equipped to deal with the layers of complexity involved when trying to implement in-school responses (European Council, 2013). This has led to the development of alternative educational settings that focus on the specific needs of young people who weren't connected with mainstream education. In Ireland, alternatives have generally focused on provisions for young people over 16 years leaving a gap for a younger age cohort who are equally in need of alternative responses to their disengagement (DES, 2010).

This was the context for the Presentation Sisters response in 2006 to educational disadvantage when they identified the need for an alternative path to learning and accreditation for young people who were outside of the mainstream system. Led by Sr. Ann-Marie Quinn, following a research phase that looked at innovative models, the Presentation Sisters agreed to fund the development and implementation of a project to test the Notschool.net model in an Irish context (iScoil, 2011). The project was originally established in 2007 as Notschool.net Ireland with the support of Professor Stephen Heppell's Notschool.net, a pilot model initially conceived and managed by Ultralab, a learning and technology research centre based at Anglia Polytechnic University in Essex (Heppell, 1998). Designed as an online learning community and resource for vulnerable and disaffected young people who were not engaging with any other form of education, between 1998 and 2005 Notschool.net UK was rolled out to 24 Education Authorities across the UK and reintroduced over 1,300 young people to learning (Duckworth, 2005). Between 2007 and 2009 Notschool.net Ireland tested how the programme would work with a range of young people across Ireland, and learned from the UK partners as part of the wider Notschool.net community.

A period of reflection and discussion took place within Notschool.net Ireland during 2009. This included consultation by the central team working on development and implementation with students, parents, online teachers and Advisory Board and concluded together with an external evaluation that the model was proving successful in achieving its core aims (Bassett, 2011). It was proposed and agreed to set up an independent online learning programme in Ireland. The main reasons for the decision were to gain autonomy in the development of the learning model and adapt it to the Irish context, offer Irish-based accreditation linked to the National Qualifications Framework, develop and pilot other approaches including a centre-based blended approach and provide curriculum and content

more relevant to Irish students (iScoil, 2011). Students formally transferred to iScoil in September 2009, and since then the project has each year proven to deliver a successful alternative that allows young people to access education, continue to learn, gain accreditation and progress in their lives.

The culture of research and development continues on iScoil reinforcing that a key to the success of the programme is the personalized, student centred approach to teaching, support, curriculum and assessment at the core of the service both online and in our direct communication and interaction with learners (Checkley, 2014). This reflects key lessons in good practice for second-chance educational provisions identified across a range of traditional alternative programmes developed for early school leavers. What distinguishes iScoil from traditional alternatives however is the scope of reach facilitated by an online learning environment. We are not alone in recognizing this potential. Although unique in Ireland, in 2011 an iScoil conference *Staying Connected*, reported findings and placed iScoil in a wider context of good practice in the use of online learning and digital technology in education. One of the keynote speakers, Susan Patrick, CEO of iNacol, reinforced the direction that iScoil had taken with evidence of similar models in the US where recent research advocated the potential of online and blended learning. Used thoughtfully and strategically creating effective online learning programmes can open up educational access to those who would otherwise face disadvantage or simply lack of opportunity (Archambault, 2010).

This effective use of online teaching and learning on iScoil is seen to facilitate a safe place to learn. Individual differences in reason for referral appear to be

Educational stakeholders recognize the role of ICT as a key enabler of innovation and creativity in education and training and for learning in general. Innovating in Educating and training is also a key priority in several flagships of the Europe 2010 Strategy including Youth on the Move, the Digital Agenda and the Innovation Agenda. (European Commission, 2011)

successfully addressed in the provision of choice in location of learning, at-home or centre based, and the student specific learning plans that an online learning environment allows. When asked about their experiences in mainstream school compared to iScoil, the response from students suggest they were not disengaged from education or learning as such but instead felt excluded for whatever reason from a system (Checkley, 2014). Corresponding to previous Irish and European research (DES, 2010; EC, 2013) what we see in our students each year is of a group of young people who are motivated to learn and achieve but found mainstream school limiting, confining and not meeting their needs or circumstances. Our

aim therefore is to harness the potential of technology in facilitating the complexity of an appropriate design, not limited to the provision of accessible, adaptable content but also to flexible interaction between learner and teacher.

Therefore, in response to the changing landscape of education iScoil continues to develop and explore the potential for online learning to facilitate many of the successful characteristics of traditional alternative programmes together with the ability of technology to provide a design that enhances the educational experience for all those involved in learning and teaching. As international research describes education as a powerful tool by which economically and socially marginalized children can access life opportunities (UN, 2014) in exploring how iScoil achieves success it could be proposed that technology is an equally powerful tool in providing the platform that facilitates access to education. On iScoil we are very proud of our students who show commitment and tenacity often in the most difficult of circumstances. While we see the current model work we are motivated to develop and improve, to stay current with the fast-changing pace of online learning and the opportunities of access that technology in education is allowing. Our motivation is to grow and resource iScoil so that it can reach even more young people currently isolated or disengaged from educational opportunity and to allow them the access to enhance their life opportunities. Read on below to see the stories of some of our students.

1. Michael

Michael started in post primary in September 2009 and did not attend after three weeks following repeated suspensions due to behavioural difficulties even though School Completion Programme and Home School Liason were involved in attempts to support him to return to school. Michael had a diagnosis of ADHD and was referred to child psychiatry team in Mullingar. The Education Welfare Officer considered him a 'child at risk' and he was also referred to the local Youth Justice Project by both Gardai and EWO and this included a referral to iScoil in early 2010 when he was 14 years as part of the Longford Blended Learning Centre hosted by Longford Youth Service.

Attending a more informal blended centre proved a successful alternative and Michael left iScoil in June 2012 having achieved QQI Level 3 certification in 5 subjects. He was the first member of his family to complete qualifications at this level and was very proud of his achievement. With the support of Longford Youth Service and iScoil on leaving Michael continued his education on a Hospitality course with a local SOLAS training initiative.

While online with the project Michael not only completed recognized qualifications but also took part in personal development interventions, digital animation workshops and individual direct tuition with iScoil teachers during the latter part of his time online. With the combined support of youth service intervention and iScoil learning service there was a positive change in Michael's attitude towards both education and education providers and an increase in confidence and self-belief that allowed him to achieve and progress successfully to further education and training.

2015: Michael is now in full-time employment in a hotel in Mullingar.

2. Alan

Alan did well in Primary school and had no issues academically or socially. School refusal started during the first month of secondary school and his primary school accepted him back to repeat 6th Class with a view to building his confidence to make the transition to secondary school. The following year Alan tried a different secondary school but once again became very nervous and anxious. Alan was referred to iScoil by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) when he was 13yrs and chose to learn at home. Academically Alan

had little difficulty with the work on iScoil and achieved a QQI Level 3 Certificate in General Learning. There was a concern that learning at home would negatively impact on his already good social skills so it became a priority to support Alan attend group work sessions where possible. His learning plan also incorporated project work encouraging Alan's interests outside of iScoil for example volunteering in his local animal rescue centre.

After two years on iScoil, when he was close to completion of his QQI course Alan began to express an interest in returning to school. Together with NEWB, project manager discussed local secondary school options with Alan and advocated for him to enter senior cycle with school principal. Alan gained a place in 5th year and sat his Leaving Certificate in June 2013.

2015: Alan is now entering his third year of a third level Course in Information Technology.
(He was also crowned Irish Junior Wrestling Heavyweight Champion in 2014!)