

Are the Irish over-qualified?

A Sunday Times report over the weekend put Ireland at the top of the league in terms of overeducation in Europe. Cormac Lucey's analysis suggests that some students who may not be cut out for specific levels of academic study are being pushed into third level education at the expense of vocational education.

Do we need more plumbers and electricians and less white collar graduates, a question we have posed in this leader previously.



There is also a suggestion that we spend more than the EU average on education, although much of this spend would be related to pay roll, where Irish lecturers would be paid more than many of their European counterparts. The Sunday times report said we spend seven (7) per cent of national income on education against an EU average of 5.3 per cent. Here in Waterford, we are badly in need of a Technological University for the South East. Providing more technically-oriented education has its benefits, but the question has to be asked are some people over educated for medium skill jobs?

Speaking last September, Tony Fahey, Emeritus Professor of UCD, said that a third of Irish workers are at least one educational level above the international norm for their jobs.

This could also lead to some dissatisfaction if people feel over qualified and may mean that career expectations after college are not being met. Working in a supermarket or retail job may not necessarily require a college degree. During the recession, people studied more as there were no jobs out there and this is part of the consequence.

Now we find that in the building trade there is a lack of skilled people and not enough apprenticeships.

During the crisis there were few openings in the building trade for example now that is changing as the economic cycle changes and we believe there is clearly a case to expand some VEC programmes.

The cost of education and growing student debt will represent sizeable problems going forward as housing costs rise. Parents are discovering that sending their offspring to Dublin or Cork represents a huge expense and using the local VEC or WIT ought to be considered, especially for students who are not as academically minded. After all, college is not for everyone.

We understand that there is a major demand for child care courses as well as a demand for carers for the elderly.

There is also a growing drop out rate in some third level courses as expectations are not being met – or perhaps some courses may be proving too difficult.

Some students may not be mature enough to have the self-study discipline and do the outside research and reading required for courses. A more thorough review is needed if Third level courses are to be made more suitable for the current labour market demand.

Another controversy is people taking subsidised courses and then heading abroad to countries with lower taxes, meaning Ireland is the ultimate loser. This is happening in particular in medical care, nursing and education. We have the high tax payer funded education and other countries benefit, some claw back is needed in such cases where funds are repaid. A more varied debate is needed in the years ahead and it would be interesting to hear Minister Halligan's thoughts on this issue.