



We will reap what we have sown

WHEN third-level tuition fees were abolished in 1996, sceptics saw the move as an attempt by the governing rainbow coalition to gain popularity and win the election the following year. But the education minister, Niamh Bhreathnach, defended the move skilfully on the grounds it would open the doors of universities to children from poorer backgrounds.

The bid for popularity failed. The rainbow coalition lost the 1997 election and Fianna Fail returned to office. It is still there, and tuition fees are still off the agenda - despite the strongest hints from Batt O'Keeffe when he was education minister. What of the moral argument? The university chiefs never bought it. They said it would contribute to underfunding. And it has. They argued that primary, not higher, education should be prioritised. Now their views have received powerful support from an in-depth analysis carried out by the Geary Institute in University College Dublin. It studied the results and outcomes of up to 3,000 school leavers a year for 15 years and concluded the abolition of fees had failed entirely to rectify the class balance in the universities.

The findings on the class question are stark. Children whose father is a professional get, on average, 90 more Leaving Certificate points than the children of a manual worker. Having an unemployed father "costs" 30 points. The "penalty" for having a disabled father is about 50 points.

Similar disparities exist everywhere in the world, though some countries have had great success in reducing them. Various initiatives over recent decades should have placed us among them. Sadly, that has not happened and we should address ourselves to the causes and effects.

Restoring tuition fees would be an inadequate answer. We have to look at overall funding for the sector. Almost certainly we will have to increase it. We also have to deal seriously, for the first time, with the question of primary and pre-school education. And we have to approach the issue, not in terms of politics or popularity, but in human and economic terms.

Educational failure is linked to social deprivation. But educational success not only benefits from, but stimulates, economic advance. We should regard every student, at every level, as an investment. And we should take very great care that we do not lose potential entrepreneurs and scientists because we wrongly think the initial investment costs too much.