



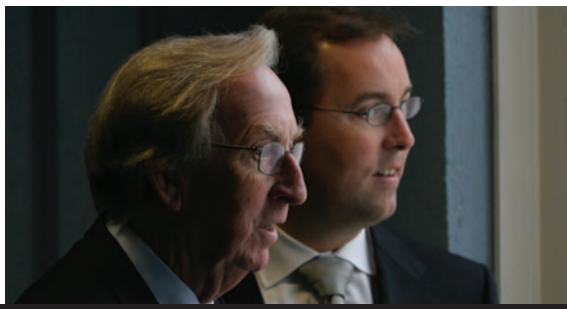
The Institute of Education

79/85 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2

From a few extra classes to a national institution

In its 40 years of operations, The Institute of Education has grown to become, arguably, the flagship for second level education in Ireland.

*Writes Dave Boland
Sunday Tribune 10th August 2008*



It is a strange fact, but the revolution in Irish private second level education started with a stray mongrel wandering the streets of Moscow. This husky/terrier cross-breed named Laika would subsequently go down in history as the first earthling in space, following her launch into orbit Sputnik 2 in 1957. Though Laika died only a few hours into her maiden flight, her legacy was so profound and far reaching that, though it can hardly have been part of the Soviet Union's masterplan, it led indirectly to the establishment of the Institute of Education in Dublin. "When Russians sent Laika into space, it proved they were far ahead of the Americans in terms of science and maths," said Ray Kearns, founder of the Institute of Education.

"Because of this, the US pumped billions into its universities – it was the most important event ever in the American educational system. And this in turn created the new mathematics which became such a feature of the 1960s worldwide."

Kearns had just completed a degree in Mathematics, when he won a number of scholarships, firstly to the University of Pittsburgh and subsequently to Boston College and Fordham University – all paid for by the National Science Foundation.

He returned to Ireland, and to the position of Senior Mathematics Master at Gonzaga College in 1963. But it was his experience in the US that laid the foundations for what is now the largest second level college in the country. "In the United States, I saw a land of opportunity," he said. "I could see the spirit of enterprise all across the country and this was as true of education as of anything else. In America, it was accepted practice to give private tuition to students, whereas in the Ireland of that time it was unheard of." Still, because of his unique qualifications, Kearns soon began to give courses in new maths to both teachers and Leaving Certificate students.

“The ladder to success is climbed through education.”

So successful was his tuition for students that he hired a site in Leeson Street in Dublin – but little did he know then that 40 years later, the street would house a major institution teaching around 5,000 students every year, between fifth year, sixth year, repeat students and grinds. “My guiding light throughout the expansion of the Institute of Education was the fact that I needed to get the best teachers to give the best to the students – and to do that, I would have to pay the best,” he said.

“I was competing with the State and charging people for my services – so I wouldn’t have got anywhere with underperforming, inexperienced, inefficient teachers. But by ensuring that we got only the best teachers, the Institute has grown beyond our wildest expectations.”

Ray Kearns has always followed the mantra that the ladder to success is climbed through education. He is also aware that, if you can guarantee this success, parents will be willing to pay for it – which is why thousands of students show up to his classes every weekend, with hundreds more attending his full-time courses.

“The great American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had a theory,” said Kearns. “He said that if you can write a better book, preach a better sermon or make a better mousetrap, though you build your house in the woods, the world will beat a path to your doorstep. I believe that if you can give people value for money, they will come to you.” Kearns has hardly built his Institute in the woods – quite the opposite, in fact, and his buildings on Lower Leeson Street occupy, arguably, the most prestigious address of any secondary school in the city. But word of mouth has become such a powerful tool for the Institute of Education that thousands of students from Dublin, Ireland and overseas beat a path to his doorstep every year.

One of the reasons for this is that the Institute of Education in the 21st century caters for students at any point on the whole ability spectrum.

It may have built its reputation on its ability to produce the highest number of A1s in the country, but it is primarily concerned with allowing students of all abilities to maximise their potential. “If a student is motivated to get a C or a D at Higher Level, or an A or a B at Ordinary Level, then that’s fine with us,” said Kearns. “We see some fantastic results here, whether it is the seven A1s that we achieved in one year, or the repeat student who came in with 300 points, but who achieved 450 points as a result of one year at the Institute.”

Since its official opening in 1969, the Institute of Education has witnessed significant changes in Irish education. Its establishment coincided with Minister Donagh O’Malley’s introduction of free fees for second level students, which increased the numbers attending second level schools and so had the side-effect of increasing the competitive aspect of Irish education. Thus, in effect, the Institute was born at the same time as the points system and through excellence, it has helped to fuel the competition for third level places. “As the demand for third level education grew, the points requirement grew, and hence the demand for extra tuition grew,” said Kearns. “You can see the extra competition in the students these days – they need to be far more motivated, and, if they are not, then it’s Goodnight Irene. But our biggest achievement is to see the thousands of youngsters who are getting places in courses that they wouldn’t have got into without getting a penny from the State or taking a penny from the taxpayers.”



Leeson Street circa 1979



Leeson Street, IOE buildings today