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Trade Winds Blowing

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It is hard to believe that an elephantine amount of students enrol in third level colleges across Ireland annually. The facts confirm it. We have one of the highest per capita third level enrolment rates in Europe. The number of enrolments is more surprising considering a 2017 European Commission report stated we paid the 2nd highest college tuition fees. Exorbitant on or near campus accommodation costs are not a deterrent. In fact, according to an Irish Times report in 2018, the proportion of school-leavers going on to third level education has risen from about 10% in the 1960s to about 60% today.

Interestingly some 5,800 students – or 14% of all entrants to third level, did not move onto the 2nd year of their course. What is this statistic telling us?

A large part of the problem is the enshrined belief amongst parents that view a college education as compulsory. Many parents have a one-track mind on the subject. An awareness of the financial risks of committing to a college course for the sake of it is needed, and the fact that there are more practical options out there, less academic fields that better suit a large portion of young people in Ireland.

Currently there is an acute shortage of people skilled in trades due to recession driven emigration during the ‘Crash’ and the return of more favourable economic conditions. It is hard to believe there is a huge paucity of young people not looking to cash in on this kind of work. The opportunities are glaring. What is wrong with a paid apprenticeship, flexibility to work anywhere and the ability to start working immediately upon finishing your 2nd level education? It seems like a no-brainer. For some however, the supposed lack of job security, no letters after your

name, and the fear of missing the raucous college lifestyle Ireland offers, seem to sway them away from this ever-important line of work.

There is a rather negative stigma surrounding people who do not go to college after finishing 2nd level education. There is a depreciation of this choice in Ireland. Although this view is disproven by the astronomical success of business people and tradesmen around the country who, having never got a college diploma, are living far more lavish lifestyles than most who did. People like Terry Prone, Jenny Greene or JP McManus all carved their path in life. From curtain makers to plumbers, joiners to machinists, the country is gasping for skilled tradespeople to fill the void.

Some believe that the lack of motivation to work in a trade is due to a lack of interest in practical work. In an age of screens and technology, young people do not get a chance to try their hand at anything practical or vocational. They may never get a chance to find out if a trade would suit them.

It is an important part of life to enjoy your work and a trade is a vocation that offers that. Perfected work over years leads to mastery, which makes work much less tedious. Even if your trade does not suit, you can drop an apprenticeship very easily with very little consequence, compared to the fiscal repercussions of college dropout.

In conclusion, it is clear that this country needs to find a better balance between the amount of young people going to college and the amount learning a trade. The stigma needs shedding and practical, vocational pursuits should be encouraged. It is time for Ireland to adapt the sails and capture the trade winds blowing.