The Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) @ 50

Since its First Meeting of Scholars, held at University College Galway from 8 to 10 April 1976, the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) has grown to become one of Ireland's principal organisations for educational research and scholarship, and is now affiliated internationally wit global associations, including the World Education Research Association, American Educational Research Association, British Educational Research Association, Scottish Educational Research Association and Nordic Educational Research Association.

From 28 to 30 May 2026, the ESAI hosted its annual conference in Galway, From Legacy to Futures: Celebrating ESAI's First Meeting of Scholars and 50 Years of Irish Educational Research. This year's event celebrated the ESAI's foundational First Meeting of Scholars and fifty years of education scholarship and teaching-inspired research, across all disciplines, subjects and methodologies of educational research, in Ireland and internationally.



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The transformative potential of educational research and scholarship

Educational research and scholarship have had a formative impact on the history and structure of our educational system and society in Ireland. When we refl ct on one of the pivotal moments in our educational history in this country, we can see the revolutionary, positive eff cts of a significan policy initiative informed and mobilised by research.

It is now the narrative of Irish education legend that on 10 September 1966, notably a Saturday, at a seminar of the National Union of Journalists in Dublin, then Minister for Education Donogh O'Malley took the unprecedented step of announcing that post-primary education would be universally available to all schoolchildren. As O'Malley rightly

and passionately noted in his famous speech, the lack of progression from primary to secondary education was a 'dark stain on the national conscience'. The impact when free-second level, including free school transport, was introduced in 1967 changed Ireland utterly – for the better, for all young people and learners. Broadcaster Joe Duffy has called the free education scheme a 'miracle' (2017), with Professor Dermot Keogh describing it as 'liberation for an entire generation of Irish schoolchildren, and successive generations' (Ó Mórdha, 2000). Fintan O'Toole (2024) reflected: 'For me the Irish revolution wasn't 1916 or 1922, it was 1967, 1968 when they introduced free second-level education.'

Professor Áine Hyland outlines the contemporary context, when it wasn't necessarily an accepted, established idea that second-level education in Ireland needed any significant change. Crucially, it was research – in the form of the *Investment in Education* report of 1965 in particular – that presented 'a devastating analysis of the Irish educational system', making 'a compelling case for radical reform' (2018).

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The ESAI's First Meeting of Scholars

A decade on from free secondary education, arguably no coincidence, an important meeting took place, organised not by email (as we are today so accustomed to) but by the exchange of letters. In April 1976, a Meeting of Scholars and inaugural Education Conference was convened at the then Education Department, University College Galway (now University of Galway).

It marked the first time that an all-island conference of educational scholars took place, bringing together teachers, policymakers and researchers from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. What is remarkable is that this meeting took place at a time of significant, ongoing tragedy in Ireland, during the Troubles, with the 1970s an especially violent decade in the sectarian conflict, and Bloody Sunday in 1972

The inaugural meeting in UCG laid the foundations for the establishment of the ESAI, which to this day remains Ireland's principal all-Ireland research association. In its fifty years, ESAI has grown to become an internationally recognised and established research association, playing a central role in the career development of educational scholars and researchers, and the ESAI is now a liated with the World Educational Research Association (WERA) and British Educational Research Association (BERA), among others.

Exemplifying ESAI's international collaboration, in the last two years, the ESAI, the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA), BERA and the Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) have inaugurated the Northern Networks, which are research events hosted online by keynote speakers and attended by scholars and teachers across Europe to discuss key contemporary issues in global education. The most recent Northern Networks event (January 2026) focused on social justice (see https://esai.ie/northern-networks-event-on-social-justice/).

In May 2026, the ESAI returned to University of Galway to celebrate its pioneering First Meeting of Scholars. This article charts the growth of the ESAI since 1976 by highlighting some of the major developments it has led in educational research and scholarship.

ESAI – a research association for all educational scholars, policymakers and teachers

From its beginnings, the ESAI has provided a forum – predicated on the idea of 'critical friendship' – for teachers, policymakers, researchers and scholars from across all disciplines, methodologies and subjects of education, to come together, to share, discuss and debate their educational ideas and research. The Preface to the *Proceedings of the Education Conference* (1976) highlights the welcoming, inclusive and generalist focus of the association, which characterised that first meeting in 1976, and which the ESAI remains rightly proud of today:

'It was a chance exchange of letters between a member of the staff of University College Galway and a colleague in the New University of Ulster that led to the decision to organise the Galway Conference. It was to be not simply an occasion for colleagues north and south to meet one another, although this was an incentive to those who planned it. Essentially, it was to be an occasion when members of the staff of Irish educational institutions and teachers would be together en famille to share their concern for education and to discuss the findings of current research. The Conference was a success beyond the hopes of those who planned and organised it.'

(Eustás Ó Héideáin, Proceedings of the Education Conference, 1976)

The generalist focus of the association makes it an especially enjoyable, stimulating and inclusive forum where scholars from across all curricular areas, subject disciplines and methodologies of education can come together to discuss and interrogate the concept of education broadly construed.

The ESAI Annual Conference

The Meeting of Scholars in 1976 set the scene for the annual meetings of the association that would follow in its first fifty years. We recently digitised the *Proceedings of the Education Conference* (1976), and we recommend the reader to download and read the programme and papers presented in Galway that year (https://doi.org/10.13025/30176). It provides an inspiring insight into the timely and impactful research that was starting to emerge in Ireland ten years on from the introduction of free second-level education. Following a position paper presented at the 1976 meeting, Professor Dónal Mulcahy led a working group to establish the ESAI, which took place formally at the 1977 conference in University College Cork. The annual conference is now a fixture in the calendar of the association, a welcome, highly anticipated opportunity for educators and scholars – from early career to emeritus – to meet, share, discuss and reflect on their work

The programme for this year's conference featured scholarship from across all disciplines, methodologies, ages and stages of education, in Ireland and internationally

The format of the conference hasn't changed in the intervening years, with the proceedings taking place over three days, Thursday to Saturday. This year's conference in Galway (28–30 May) had about 500 registered delegates from eighteen countries.

The programme for this year's conference featured scholarship from across all disciplines, methodologies, ages and stages of education, in Ireland and internationally; from early childhood education, primary and post-primary, to post-compulsory, informal and elective learning, further and higher education. A highlight of the conference annually is the Lifetime Achievement Award, which is bestowed on leading scholars of the ESAI at the conference gala on the Friday evening. In recent years, the association has also introduced an Early Career Researcher (ECR) Award for the best paper submissions by emerging scholars in education.



ESAI Conference

Peer-reviewed international journal, *Irish Educational Studies*

A key development of the association since its beginnings and the *Proceedings of the Education Conference* (1976) has been the emergence and growth of the ESAI's flagship international, peer-reviewed research journal, *Irish Educational Studies* (IES). The journal has been published internationally since 2005 by established academic publisher Routledge/Taylor & Francis. Selected papers of the annual conferences and all articles accepted for publication in the journal, following peer review, are available online at www.tandfonline.com.

To celebrate the 50 years of ESAI and IES's central role in educational research and scholarship, two special issues of the journal will be published. The first special issue was launched at the 2026 conference: *From Foundations to Frontiers: 50 years of Educational Research in Ireland*. This first virtual special issue of the journal is a retrospective, curating key research published by the association and journal over the first fifty years of ESAI. The second commemorative special issue, *Remembrances, Reckonings and Re-Imaginings: Worldmaking within and through Education in Times of Radical Uncertainty* is currently accepting new paper submissions; it will be published in 2027, complementing the retrospective virtual special issue now available online.

The IES journal also regularly publishes a special issue dedicated to supporting and promoting scholarship by early career and emerging educational scholars in Ireland and internationally. The IES journal has grown to become a top-ranked international scholarly journal; its latest impact factor is 1.9 with an impressive global average readership annually of c.324k paper downloads.

Alongside innovative initiatives such as dedicated special issues of early career scholarship, the ESAI has recently introduced a network specifically for early career and emerging researchers: the ESAI ERN: Early Researcher Network. Led by leading emerging scholars of education in Ireland, this pioneering collaboration reflects the ESAI's long-standing commitment to supporting all educational researchers – at all stages in their research career.

ESAI special interest groups

The ESAI has also established for several years now a network of special interest groups (or SIGs) where researchers and experts in specific domains come together to focus on key educational issues and themes, including biology education; critical and feminist research; creative thinking; curriculum studies; educational action research; further education; gender and sexuality research in education; inclusive education; lifelong guidance; praxis in initial teacher education and teacher diversity.

Commemorating the First Meeting of Scholars

In May 2026, the ESAI conference returned to the University of Galway campus. The conference included a number of commemorative events, keynote speakers, panel and roundtable discussions, including a joint symposium between the ESAI and the Department of Education and Youth's new Futures-Oriented Research Network, Fíorú. One of the highlights of this year's meeting was the unveiling of a commemorative plaque in Room D202, Old Arts Building, University of Galway, which served as a focal point for academic and social events in 1976. The dedication on the plaque encapsulates the legacy and continuing transformative impact of ESAI on scholarship in Ireland and globally: 'From the foundational vision of our early educational history emerges our enduring, shared commitment to scholarship for inclusive educational futures for all.'

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Prof Tony Hall representing ESAI at the World Education Research Association (WERA) Symposium at the American Educational Research Association Conference (AERA) 2026 in Los Angeles