Future Proofing Schools: Bringing School Policies into the AI Era[1, 2]

Ann Marcus-Quinn, Selina McCoy*

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

The promise of AI in education is significant, but it is equally important to manage expectations and focus on thoughtful, equitable implementation to realise its potential. In Ireland, there has been a notable absence of clear guidelines from the Department of Education and Youth on how teachers and schools should navigate the complexities of the AI world. Up to now, they have been left to independently determine the extent to which AI tools can be used in teaching and learning.

Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs) in schools traditionally govern internet and device use, aiming to provide a safe and controlled learning environment. However, as technology has advanced, so too have the expectations and demands on these documents. This paper assesses the readiness of current AUPs to address AI and outlines potential risks and benefits for post-primary schools. Education systems and school communities internationally grapple with the risks and benefits of AI, making effective AUPs vital. However, we have little evidence on the experiences of schools in Ireland in addressing these needs, a gap this paper addresses.

DATA AND METHODS

Drawing on documentary analysis and a survey of school leaders, the paper seeks to understand the nature and extent of AUPs in post-primary schools and the barriers to their creation and adaptation over time. This study reviewed AUPs from the largest post-primary schools in Ireland; some 51 schools with over 1,000 students as of July 2024. Schools with large student populations were chosen to reflect settings where digital tools are more likely to be heavily used, potentially increasing the relevance of comprehensive AUPs. The AUPs were collected and

analysed for references to AI and other recent technological advancements, with particular attention to guidelines around ethical AI use, privacy, and application in educational contexts.

Additionally, a survey was conducted among 87 school leaders to capture their perspectives on updating AUPs to meet the demands of today's digital environment. The survey gathered qualitative data on the challenges faced by schools in maintaining relevant and up-to-date policies, as well as the types of support that would be most beneficial.

RESULTS

Only six schools had AUPs that were current for the Academic Year 2024/25, revealing a general lag in policy updates that address rapid digital advancements in schools. Many policies dated from before 2020. Some schools restricted public access to their AUPs post-2020, indicating a shift towards guarded policy distribution. Across all 51 AUP documents AI-related guidelines were notably absent, with most AUPs lacking comprehensive instructions on emerging digital tools, underscoring the disconnect between policy and practice. This disconnect operates on two levels: first, at the school level, where AUPs fail to reflect current practice as teachers and students increasingly engage with AI tools without explicit guidance; and second, at the policy level, where even if schools sought to update their AUPs, the absence of a national framework or government-issued guidance leaves them without a reference point for responsible inclusion of AI.

From the survey data, just 10 per cent of school leaders were confident their AUP addresses needs of the school community, with the vast majority highlighting shortfalls. School leaders in voluntary secondary schools were more likely to feel their AUP is outdated, reflecting the different supports and resources for this sector compared to ETB schools. Almost three-quarters of school leaders report that their AUP does not address the use of AI by staff and students. In terms of familiarity with AI tools, just 13 per cent of school leaders indicate they are familiar with AI tools and actively use them. School leaders are open to students using AI tools like ChatGPT, but only once guidelines are in place. Overall, school leaders are more likely to identify risks rather than benefits in adopting AI tools within their school setting.

IMPLICATIONS

The promise of AI in education is significant; AI-based educational tools offer the ability to deliver tailored learning experiences and personalised feedback, as well as specialised support for non-traditional learners and children with diverse needs. But it is equally important to manage expectations and focus on thoughtful, equitable implementation to realise its potential. Some countries are actively integrating AI into their education systems, underpinned by clear guidelines. Estonia is one example, where AI is being used to promote personalised learning. There the Ministry of Education and Research has established an AI council comprising educational scientists, teachers, and entrepreneurs to guide this initiative and the development of general principles to ensure consistent and stable AI integration in schools.

Italy also initiated an AI pilot as part of the national strategy for AI 2024-2026 to integrate AI into 15 classrooms across four regions, aiming to enhance digital skills among students. The initiative employs AI tools on tablets and computers to serve as virtual assistants, facilitating personalised learning experiences and aiding teachers in developing tailored educational methods. This effort begins to address Italy's position among the EU countries with the lowest basic digital skills, with plans to expand the programme if successful.

The lack of guidance in Ireland risks significant variation in AI implementation across institutions, until standardised policies are introduced. Addressing the gap in AUPs is critical as AI becomes increasingly integrated into educational tools, with impacts on privacy, student behaviour, and educational equity. The Department of Education and Youth could provide a model AUP or guidelines, giving schools a basis for developing AI-inclusive policies. Transparent, accessible AUPs foster trust and provide clear expectations for students, parents and educators alike.