07 From Pilot to Ecosystem: How Chartered Accountants Ireland is Scaling a New Standard in Professional Education

Ian Browne, Director of Education | Chartered Accountants Ireland

The Story So Far: A Self-Contained Recap

In the June 2025 Endeavor Report, Chartered Accountants Ireland (CAI) was featured as a Quadrant 2: Strategic Enabler, an organization using adaptive learning technology to build a transformative new capability. For an institution with a 137-year legacy, the challenge was to modernize its educational model to improve efficiency, personalization, and learner outcomes for a growing student body.

The solution was an ambitious pilot of a leading adaptive learning platform across three core subjects. The results were immediate and powerful: the pilot demonstrated a remarkable 50% reduction in average learning time while improving pass rates, proving the strategic value of their new approach.

That success, however, was just the foundation for a far more ambitious vision.

The Maturation Journey

In the months since, CAI has dramatically scaled its adaptive learning initiative from a successful pilot into the core of its qualification program. "Year one and year two of our 3-year qualification is now launched fully adaptively", explains Ian Browne, Director of Education at CAI. The program has expanded from the initial three subjects to 12 full subjects across the first two years, growing the user base for fully adaptive content from hundreds to thousands of students.

More significantly, the initiative has evolved beyond a single technology into what Ian accurately describes as a true learning ecosystem.

"It's all in the one system," he notes. This integrated platform now connects three core components into a single, seamless experience for students, employers, and CAI itself:

1. The **adaptive learning platform** for technical knowledge.
2. A **practical experience diary** for students to track on-the-job competency.
3. **Self-service dashboards** for employers to monitor their trainees' progress across both technical learning and practical experience. This integration represents a massive leap forward, creating a holistic view of a student's journey from theoretical knowledge to demonstrated professional competence.

The pass rate for the historically difficult Finance subject jumped from a long-term average of 75% to an unprecedented 92%.

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CHALLENGES OF SCALING & MATURATION

The primary challenge of this massive scaling effort was not the technology, but the human resources required to fuel it. The team discovered a significant, two- to four-month learning curve for onboarding new Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to the complex and comprehensive new content development workflow. "The problem is you're now trying to take those people who are brilliant at the old way and then say, 'oh, by the way, that's not even the starting point now,'" Ian says of the challenge.

This steep learning curve, combined with the fact that many SMEs were part-time contributors, led to a critical realization that the initial resource planning was insufficient.

The team had to onboard twice the number of SMEs they had originally budgeted for—a 2x increase in human resource investment to keep the project on track. This provided a powerful leadership lesson. As Ian puts it, you can have a "Starship Enterprise," but you need enough "key people on the bridge to man it at Warp Drive". The most advanced technology is only as effective as the skilled human talent available to operate and sustain it.

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OUTCOMES & LONGITUDINAL IMPACT

The impact of the scaled-up program has been profound, particularly in the historically difficult Finance subject. The pass rate jumped from a long-term average of around 75% to an unprecedented 92%. The average mark also increased by 11 points, from 58 to 69 out of 100. Ian attributes this leap to the development of automaticity. The system's constant probing and reinforcement enabled students to master core concepts so effectively that their recall in an exam setting became effortless and highly accurate.

Perhaps the most significant impact, however, has been the democratization of learning. Historically, a performance gap existed between students at large accountancy firms, who receive extensive in-house tuition, and those at smaller firms.

The system closed the performance gap, proving that the technology could "democratize the learning" for all students.

The adaptive system has closed that gap. The new, higher pass rates were level across the board, proving that the technology provided such a high-quality baseline of instruction that the extra tuition offered by large firms no longer provided a noticeable advantage.

For the larger firms, this also presents an opportunity: to streamline and right-size their in-house support going forward.

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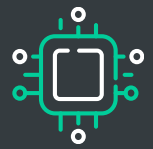
FUTURE DIRECTIONS & KEY TAKEAWAYS

With two-thirds of their qualification now fully adaptive, the team is taking a strategic pause before developing the final, most complex year. The next phase will focus on adding two new components to the ecosystem: a conversational AI tutor for real-time support and a community-building tool to foster peer-to-peer learning.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Scaling creates new, unexpected human resource challenges. When moving from a contained pilot to an enterprise-wide rollout, leaders must anticipate and budget for a significant increase in the expert time and training required to support the new system.

A mature technology solution can level the playing field. By providing a universally high standard of instruction, adaptive learning can democratize outcomes and ensure all learners have an equal opportunity to succeed.



A true "ecosystem" requires deep integration. The greatest value is unlocked when multiple components—technical learning, practical experience, and stakeholder visibility—are connected in a single, seamless experience.