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STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON HOW HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND CAN HELP MEET THE NEEDS OF THE IRISH ECONOMY

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Abstract

This paper will be in three parts; the first section will examine the current tertiary education situation in Ireland amid the global economic crisis and will review what higher education's contribution be to help alleviate the crisis. Building stronger links with the academy and the economy to help raise skills, efficiency and productivity is becoming more important in ensuring global competitiveness and retaining equality and accessibility in the academy (see Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2003: 98 [14]). The second section will look at the merge of entrepreneurship and education. As the lifelong learning society is conceptualised largely in terms of maintaining a flexible and competitive economy in the knowledge society, the concept of an entrepreneurial society will be proposed to fill the gap which has emerged since the exit of many international companies for cheaper labour elsewhere. Within all levels of education entrepreneurship should be encouraged and embedded in the curricula from the earliest stages as a prevention rather than cure to the current economic crisis in Ireland. The final section will illustrate a brief analysis of students' perspectives on how higher education can help meet the ever-changing needs of the Irish economy.

Keywords: Higher education, Ireland, crisis, students' perspectives.

1 CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN IRELAND

Ireland is experiencing a serious economic downturn resulting in job losses and renewed emigration (Barrett, Kearney and Goggin, 2009 [1]). Furthermore, the annual rate of inflation is fluctuating with a marked deterioration in the labour market since 2008 to the present day. The Irish economy is in recession (Barrett, Kearney and Goggin, 2009 [1]). Consequently, consumer sentiment is in decline (Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 2008 [12]; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2008 [45]).

Ireland needs to act fast by providing a highly skilled, productive and flexible workforce which will attract high-value inward investment and grass roots development of businesses and generation of employment. Healy and Slowey (2006 [21]) suggest that the Celtic Tiger boom had been dependent on the Irish human capital and of formal education including the mobility and return of highly skilled workers who had emigrated in the 1980's and early 1990's. They suggest that it was also in part to do with favourable incentives given to international firms willing to invest in Ireland (Healy and Slowey, 2006 [21]).

The OECD (2008^a [46]; 2009 [43]) and the more recent National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt report 2011 [53]) recommends a greater reliance on education and training particularly for labour market needs and this is concurred with in the launch of the government strategy for sustainable economic renewal (Department of the Taoiseach, 2008 [11]) where it views the importance of Ireland's performance on a global scale as an 'Innovation Island'. This essentially requires our higher education system becoming the cornerstone to this development and an impetus to economic and social renewal through elements of lifelong learning (Green, 2006 [18]), research and development and partnerships with all stakeholders within the state as the strength of the educational system has been identified as a key factor in the recent economic growth during the Celtic Tiger boom period (Fitzgerald, 2000 [13]; Smyth, McCoy, Darmody and Dunne, 2007: 139 [51]).

1.1 The Academy as the Cornerstone and Impetus to Economic and Social Development

Tertiary education in Ireland, although having been underfunded for years (OECD, 2004 [44]), has provided the country's indigenous firms and multinational corporations located here with highly skilled graduates, facilitating the role it played in the boom years of the Celtic Tiger (Healy and Slowey, 2006: 7 [21]). Coupled with this is the evidence of the expansion of the educational sector during the past two decades, (Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001 [2-5], Higher Education Authority (HEA), 1995, 1995^a [22-23]) with students now coming from a wider range of social and cultural backgrounds (Clancy and Wall, 2000 [7]; Clancy and Goastellec, 2007 [6]). However, Ireland has comparatively low participation rates in continuing education and training (Hannan, McCoy and Doyle, 2003 [20]) and lifelong learning (National Competitiveness Council (NCC), 2009: 35 [33]) in comparison with other countries.

Education is a powerful agent in generating social capital (Green, Preston and Sabates, 2003 [19]) and academies have significant power to help learners and provide opportunities to areas sunk into unemployment and struggling with large social welfare provisions. As it stands Ireland is at the verge of not being able to meet the current rapid increase in welfare demands (Mottiar, 2009 [31]) where large social welfare provisions are the norm (O'Regan, Irish Times, 2009 [36]) but could in fact become a disincentive to work. This can be a difficult issue to tackle, however, if certain provisions were put into place not only will the social welfare supports be put to good use and the human capital involved will regain a sense of worth, but the economic capital can be regenerated for the future with the aid of the local community and academies (Gaffikin and Morrissey, 2003: 98, 101 [14]) moving the state from 'welfare' to 'workfare' (Hoatson, Dixon and Sloman, 1996 [25]; Martin, 2003: 567 [28]).

As the nature of work continues to change, and the increase in unemployment does not dissipate, there is an increasing need for individuals to return to education throughout their careers to seek formal qualifications, or re-orientate their career paths through lifelong learning which is becoming a manager of the crisis. Lifelong learning in a learning society should be managed through structured partnerships (Parry, 2006: 409 [48]) with schools, colleges and universities and to include those IT companies providing broadband around Ireland as flexible learning can take place once internet access is available to everyone. But again this manages only to target those already in the 'system'.

1.2 The contribution of Ireland's Higher Education

Currently a programme for re-skilling, the Labour Market Activation Programme (LMAP), under the partnership of the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment and the HEA is advertising for candidates for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (levels 6-9 of NFQ) within the IoT's and universities in areas of study specifically required in business today and for business set-up. To qualify you must have been made redundant for at least six months and already hold some qualifications. This targets those already in the 'system' but should be open to all.

The HEA has also made some steps towards addressing the challenges for further, continuing and higher education in relation to lifelong learning and the non-traditional student. It is to further develop an integrated approach to higher education policy which addresses the changing, more diverse nature of the student body, including, in particular adult and part-time learners. These and other issues of access and equity are highlighted in their reports (HEA, 2008 [24]). However, is this just '*training-as-panacea rhetoric*' as suggested by Cruickshank (2002: 141 [9]; Martin, 2003: 567 [28])? As a recent Goodbody report (O'Leary and O'Brien, 2009 [35]) suggests, unemployment will continue to be a problem for many years to come and Ireland needs more than just 'policy discourse' to solve Ireland's growing crisis, rather what is required are 'action plans' to get things moving again.

State policies in the past have endeavoured to be policies of social inclusion and active citizenship however Ireland is still rife with inequality (CORI, 2007 [8]). The current programmes provided through state and academies are positive, but not all potential students have equality of access yet and all graduates will still be dependent on the availability of jobs in the market. This is subsequently dependent on an innovation and entrepreneurial economy where entrepreneurship and new business set up is encouraged and supported, both locally and nationally, with the help of academies and financial institutions, thus reducing a certain dependence on multinationals for the bulk of our employment and returning to grassroots businesses.

2 IRELAND'S 'MARKET-STATE' AND A PARTNERSHIP WITH EDUCATION

The knowledge society has greatly emphasised the importance of knowledge skills and know-how in the population at large, apart from social justice, the current recession now emphasises the significance of learning throughout life and as a way of life in modern society. Therefore a more coordinated approach to align the higher education institutions and enterprises through up-skilling courses and research so that they can work together to exploit and develop our current and future highly skilled graduates and employees is imperative in the role of recovery of the economy, and development of one of a more efficient knowledge economy, innovation society and entrepreneurial economy (Prospectus Survey on Higher Education, 2007 [49]; OECD, 2004; 2004a [39; 44]; 2005 [40]; Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, (ICSTI), 1999 [26]; NCC, 2008 [32]; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2002 [10]). The links between indigenous firms and the research departments of HEI's is vital. While 27% of foreign multinational firms link with HEI's, only 17% of Irish firms do (OECD, 2004^a [44]).

2.1 Entrepreneurial Economy

The Irish have worldwide recognition and reputation for being successful in business and arts, (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), 2005 [17]) and this together with the resourcefulness of the 'new' Irish can play a part in Ireland's survival. It is the non-traditional students who are generally more entrepreneurial and create businesses and in most cases employment for others, that we also need to focus on both in and outside of the academy. Kennedy (2009 [27]) illustrates that when Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) pulled out of Galway in 1993 and when Motorola pulled out of Cork after 25 years, both cities saw a wave of entrepreneurialism that boosted employment. The problem with Limerick and the pullout of DELL is the lack of financing for these new entrepreneurs. Policies need to emphasise not only the support for re-skilling and up-skilling, but also for entrepreneurship.

Today entrepreneurship and small to medium enterprises (SME) are increasingly important parts of the global business world. The responsibility for entrepreneurship education and training does not rest entirely with the academies as pointed out by Garavan and O'Connell (1994; 4 [15]). There is a need for creation of an atmosphere that will encourage entrepreneurship and recognize failures as part of the learning process (Garavan, O'Connell and Fleming, 1997 [16]). One common objective of entrepreneurship education and training is to stimulate entrepreneurial drive talent and skills and the success of an entrepreneurial economy is to encourage and reinforce attitudes towards entrepreneurship and both outline the importance of education and entrepreneurship as crucial factors for the continued success of companies (O'Brien, 2008 [34]; Morrissey, 2008 [30]). The education and training system must adapt to produce the skills to drive successful enterprise in conjunction with work-based learning and up-skilling.

The GEM report (2005 [17]) report highlights the need for early adoption of entrepreneurship in education from as early as primary education, but to reinforce entrepreneurship across all levels if indigenous enterprise is to flourish in the future and a culture of entrepreneurship is to be adopted and initiated as a career choice (Report of the Small Business Forum, 2006 [50]). Curricula and assessment mechanisms throughout education should promote critical thinking, entrepreneurship and innovation (NCC, 2009: 6 [33]). Together with this is are the LMAP's in areas of entrepreneurship and business set-up now being run across the community and FETAC colleges, the IoT's, and Universities highlighting the importance of not only the knowledge society but of a developing entrepreneurial economy.

3 RESEARCH AND RESULTS

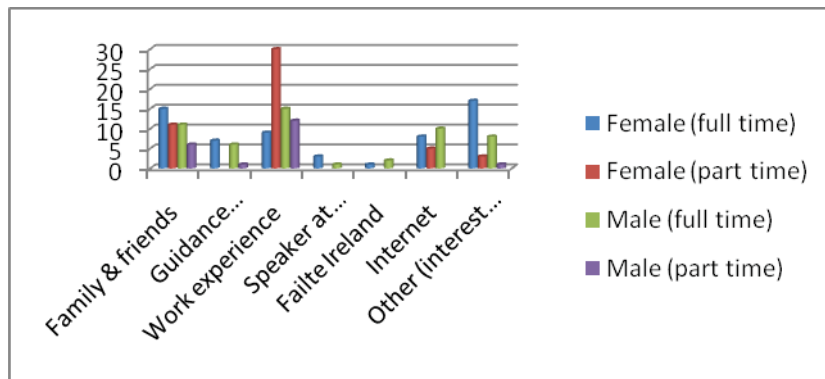
The principle aim of this research is to explore the students' perception of higher education and its role in assisting the current global economic crisis. Students were chosen at random to represent a typical sample of full-time, part-time and night-time students in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT). The questionnaire was delivered to students to complete individually and return to the researchers. Some of these students interviewed indicated the need for entrepreneurship type modules on courses and not just as options. Core elements of the course should be towards careers and not just rote learning. Some research results are highlighted next:

3.1 DIT figures

Of all who were interviewed in the DIT, 39% were male and 58% female. There were 3 invalid questionnaires out of a total of 125 respondents. All students interviewed were studying on both fulltime and part time programmes throughout the hospitality and tourism school on tourism marketing and tourism, leisure, event and hospitality management courses, which gave a broad example of students from hospitality and tourism programmes from this school. Of both male and female survey candidates, nearly 75% of the population surveyed were Irish. The remaining 25% coming from many different countries from around the world.

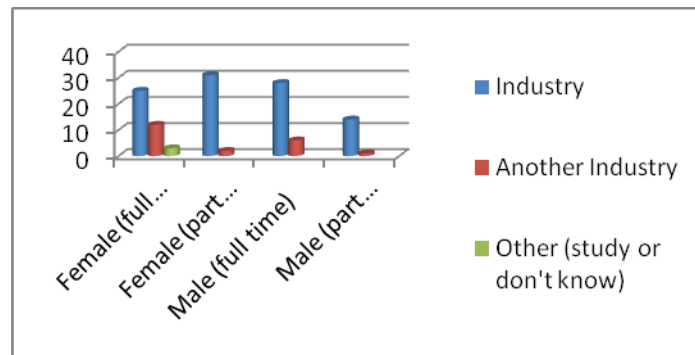
They were influenced in deciding their courses via the following key areas, one to note is that of work experience, which came in the most important influencing factors aswell as family and friends.

Figure 3.1.1: Who or what influenced your decision to go to college (DIT)



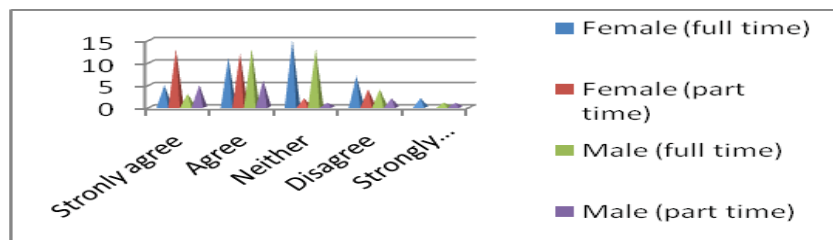
Also interesting to note is when asked whether they were ready to work in the industry or another industry because of the course they were doing, the majority of students answered affirmatively.

Figure 3.1.2 Would you work in the industry you are training for or another industry (DIT)?



Which is also not surprising that they agreed the course also met industry needs with 68 respondents agreeing that the course met industry needs.

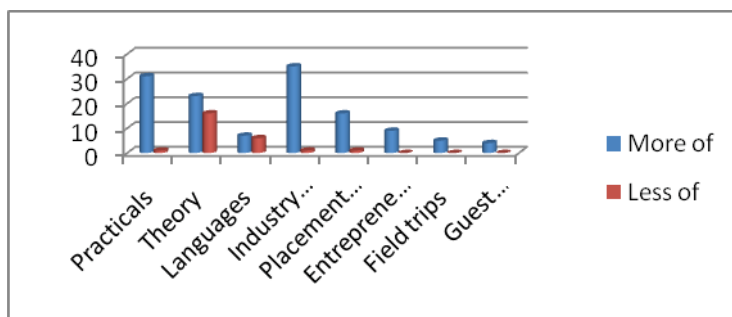
Figure 3.1.3 Does the course prepare you for industry needs (DIT)?



The students responded most favourably when asked what they see as important for improvements on their courses. The majority indicated practicals, industry experience and placement as being most important, which may indicate we are not doing enough in this area. There were nearly equal responses of more and less of both theory and practicals so we may assume what works for one student is not working for another!

However what is interesting to note is that entrepreneurial modules are not seen as needing improvement or inclusion. Does this mean we are doing enough in this area on our courses through business studies and entrepreneurial type modules?

Figure 3.1.4 What improvements would you suggest for your course (DIT)?



When asked of their opinion as to how the college contributes to dealing with the crisis the following responses were made in favour of what the college does:

Gives the economy the right type of grads and workers (Respondent 73 DIT male part time);

By better educating people they are more likely to do better thus bringing more money into the economy (Respondent 110 DIT male full time);

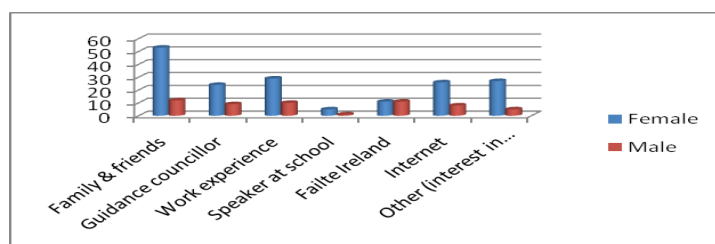
It can give you a qualification while we are going through this recession and hopefully when we finish (college) the recession will be over and there will be jobs for us! (Respondent 49 DIT female full time);

They can prepare students to be better professionals & in the end to promote and build a better economic (Respondent 21 DIT female full time).

3.2 LIT figures

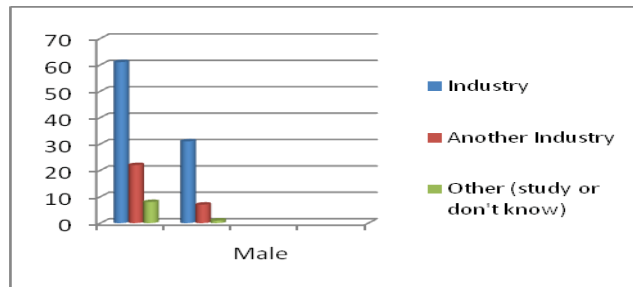
Of all who were interviewed in LIT, 43 were male and 118 female. There were 7 invalid questionnaires. All students interviewed were studying fulltime on tourism, events, sports, front office and professional cookery programmes which gave a broad example of students from hospitality and tourism programmes. Of both male and female survey candidates, nearly 75% of the population surveyed were Irish. The remaining 25% coming from many different countries from around the world. They were influenced in deciding their courses via the following key areas, one to note is that of work experience, which came in as one of the most important influencing factors after family and friends.

Figure 3.2.1: Who or what influenced your decision to go to college (LIT)



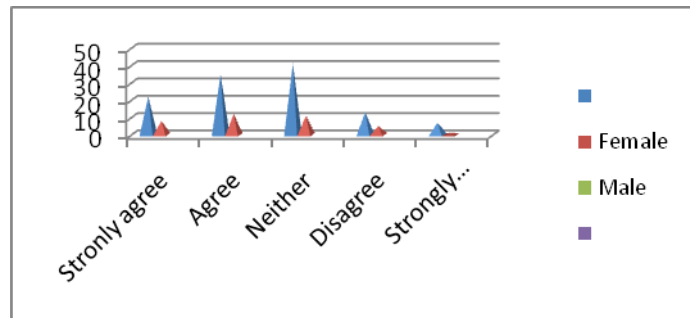
Also interesting to note is when asked whether they were ready to work in the industry or another industry because of the course they were doing, the majority of students answered affirmatively.

Figure 3.2.2 Would you work in the industry you are training for or another industry (LIT)?



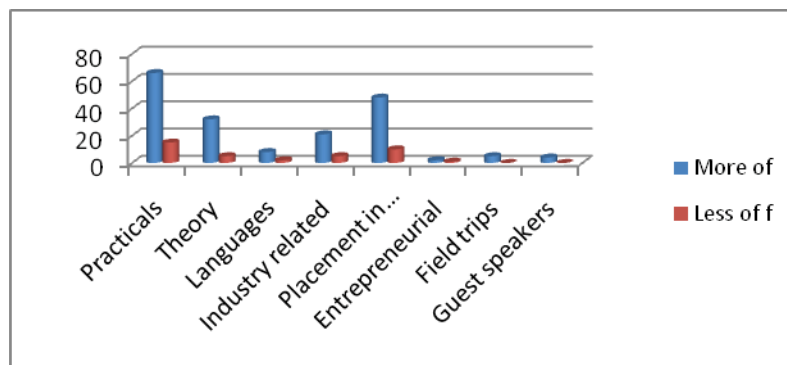
Which is also not surprising that they agreed the course also met industry needs with 77 respondents agreeing that the course met industry needs.

Figure 3.2.3 Does the course prepare you for industry needs (LIT)?



The students responded most favourably when asked what they see as important for improvements on their courses. The majority indicated practicals and placement as being most important, which may indicate we are not doing enough in this area. However what is interesting to note is that entrepreneurial modules are not seen as needing improvement or inclusion. Does this mean we are doing enough in this area on our courses through business studies and entrepreneurial type modules?

Figure 3.1.4 What improvements would you suggest for your course (DIT)?



The majority of students in both institutions agreed with the reintroduction of college fees, albeit by addressing that fact that they thought they were paying something in the way of fees already, as some students put it:

Lower entrance fees for students (respondents 51 male full time, 65 female part time);

Reduce fees please (respondents 1 female, 69 female, 154 male LIT)!

And finally when asked what colleges can contribute the following were the most interesting responses.

How do you think colleges and education can contribute to the current global economic crisis?

Increase experience for students in colleges here and abroad, and [with] companies in the industry. Educate more people; [have] more places on courses. (Respondent 1 DIT)

Work placements. (Respondent 3 DIT)

More business and entrepreneurship type subjects in 3rd and 4th year so that there is more knowledge for the future. (Respondent 10 DIT)

During times whenever unemployment increases, colleges need to actively try to persuade people to consider furthering their education when employment increases there will be a skilled workforce. (Respondent 51 LIT)

I think it makes it harder for families as they are supporting students needing to pay for a laptop, books, registration fees and sometimes accommodation. (Respondent 83 LIT)

By encouraging more people to do masters (Respondent 183 LIT)

They can contribute a lot, because by people getting the qualifications of certificates and degrees it makes it easier for them to get work. (Respondent 214 LIT)

Some students indicated that there needs to be more encouragement for work placements and links with industry for successful careers in the future for graduates. In Ireland, policy makers often quote the need for further education, training and greater skill in the services industry and it has been the IoTs' that have been one of the first to provide for this. A final paper on this research will be presented at a conference in Ireland later in 2011.

4 CONCLUSION

Education should be viewed as an intelligent investment with accountable returns, i.e. employment for individuals and tax returns for government from those employed after graduating, rather than increasing costs and public spending. However, successive government budgets of the last year have seen policies introduced whereby funding for education is being further reduced. The economic advantage and aid to social mobility, derived from gaining educational qualifications, together with the barriers associated with gaining employment by unqualified school leavers, has impacted on the demand for further and higher education. Education and training is viewed as crucial to achieving the objective of an inclusive society, where all citizens have the opportunity and incentive to participate fully in the social and economic life of the country. The link between higher education, economic and social development is addressed in a plethora of national government commissioned reports, which substantiate the view that education and training is perceived as a vital resource for a successful economy. Both have a crucial influence on economic performance at an individual and aggregate level. The previous market-state policies of expanding third-level education are based on the premise, that a highly skilled and educated workforce will enhance economic competitiveness, industrial growth, and increased levels of prosperity. What we are now witnessing since the global economic downturn hit Ireland are more and more redundancies each day, and fewer jobs available. Of those advertised, most are seeking highly skilled workers for lower pay than what they would have been used to during the Celtic Tiger era.

The research results have shown that although students view the economy as bad at the moment, through encouraging placements, learning about businesses through industry partnerships, and being shown how to set up a business and become entrepreneurial they can equip themselves with the essential skills needed for survival in the future once they graduate from college.

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