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Restructuring the higher education landscape

Ellen Hazelkorn

Over the past 40 years, Ireland has experienced a remarkable transformation in fortunes. Its emergence from a protectionist pre-industrial to a post-industrial high-tech economy came on the coat tails of European Union membership and accelerating internationalisation and deregulation of financial and investment markets.

Strategically situated between the United States and Europe, Ireland became a leading importer of foreign direct investment. By 2000, it was the second-largest exporter of computer software in the world after the US, and home to the top-10 pharmaceutical companies.

The boom years of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ made it the poster child for globalisation. After the 2008 global financial crisis, Ireland became the symbol of economic collapse, before being rescued by the ‘troika’ of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank. Today, it is variously described as the great experiment or the success story for austerity.

Higher education

The expansion of Irish higher education reflects these changing dynamics.

Until the crisis, the system had grown with minimum policy guidance or coordination.

The exception was the government’s rigid enforcement of the European binary model, with universities catering for classical education, and institutes of technology providing vocational-focused education with a strong emphasis on the region and small- and medium-sized enterprises.

There are a small number of other institutions, for-profit colleges and an uncoordinated and unrecognised further education sector.

Today, about 40 institutions cater for a total student population of 190,000, which is estimated to rise to over 250,000 by 2020. Until recently, the primary focus has been on widening access. The introduction of free secondary education in 1967 drove the first wave of transformation.

Higher education remained largely disconnected from other policy considerations until the 1990s, when rapid economic growth caused labour shortages and international competitiveness forced a new direction. The abolition in 1995 of tuition fees for all undergraduate students played another crucial role.

Today, all policy documents and national strategies link higher education, the knowledge economy and global competitiveness. While the government maintains its commitment to 72% participation, quality and excellence are the major drivers.

The National Strategy for Irish Higher Education to 2030 (2011) made recommendations about *inter alia* lifelong learning, equality between full- and part-time study modes, and

internationalisation.

Controversially, the Higher Education Authority was given an enhanced role to drive change and modernisation. All institutions would be subjected to greater oversight, through a strategic dialogue process and institutional contracts, while the twin objectives of rationalisation and institutional diversity would create a few new technological universities, by merging larger institutions of technology.

This gap is currently being addressed. *Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape* (2012) sets out guiding principles and objectives for a “coordinated system of higher education”, with an emphasis on mission distinctiveness. Given the financial and competitive pressures, no single institution is expected to cover all disciplines or research fields.

The future system’s differentiation will be based on qualifications level, discipline specialisation, programme orientation, regional engagement, student profile, mode of provision, and research intensity and specialisation. Collaboration, alliances and mergers are actively encouraged to reduce duplication and ensure better efficiency, value for money, and higher quality.

Before 31 July, each higher education institution had to say how it fits into this new landscape, the distinctive role it will play and whether it plans to merge with another institution. Institutions of technology wishing to be designated as technological universities were required to indicate their intentions.

All proposals are to be reviewed by an international panel, which will look at how individual strategic plans fit together to provide a range of programmatic and research missions, and meet social and economic needs, demographic trends and financial considerations.

By the end of 2012, the Higher Education Authority will recommend a ‘blueprint’ for Irish higher education, indicating numbers, types and locations of institutions required over the next 10-20 years.

Under strain

Irish higher education is a public-funded system and, as everywhere, it is now under strain. Student numbers have risen sharply, due to demographic factors and loss of alternative employment opportunities; but state funding per student has decreased almost 20% since 2007, to €8,000 (US\$10,400).

Each undergraduate student pays a ‘contribution’, now €2,000 per annum, up from €900 in 2008 and due to increase to €3,000 by 2015. There is a student grant system, but no loan programme. All postgraduates pay a tuition fee. Sustainability is the biggest challenge.

Only minor success has been achieved in finding alternative funding from philanthropic and commercial sources. Given likely further declines in public funding, such funding will be inadequate to meet anticipated demand to assure quality. The current government – responsible for the abolition of tuition fees in the 1990s – campaigned against their reintroduction in 2011.

Various options are under consideration, including a higher contribution from families who can afford to pay, variegated fees for different programmes, allowing institutions to set a market-based fee, restricting student numbers nationally or per institution, and expanding the role of private providers.

Research growth and policy

Prior to 2000, Ireland had no national research policy, investment strategy or international reputation in scientific research. Despite significant investments since then, it still spent only 1.2% of gross domestic product (public and private) on higher education, well below averages in many other countries.

Nonetheless, by 2009 Ireland ranked eighth on the impact of research publications, within a group of 20 comparator countries. When the crisis hit, research funding was reduced by almost 30% between 2009 and 2010. Since then, the government has sought to preserve research and development funding.

A Research Prioritisation Exercise undertaken by the Department of Enterprise, Jobs and Innovation during 2010-11 was tasked with defining a strategic framework for research funding and activity.

While Science Foundation Ireland had targeted information and communications technology, biotechnology and energy, other agencies encouraged a bottom-up approach. Essentially, the Research Prioritisation Exercise marks the end of *laissez-faire* and building a broad base of expertise in favour of strong endorsement for a “more top-down, targeted approach” with an emphasis on research, which links directly to societal and economic needs.

After an extensive process, 14 priority areas plus six platform sciences and technology were selected.

Each field was reviewed against four high-level criteria: association with large global markets in which Irish-based enterprise does or can realistically compete; public investment in research and development is necessary and can complement private-sector research; Ireland has objectively measured strengths; and the field represents a national or global challenge to which Ireland should respond.

The arts, humanities, and social sciences received scant recognition – except as a ‘minority’ as ‘research for knowledge’ or ‘research for policy’. Research relevance is reinforced through a two-stage assessment process. Each proposal will be screened according to fitness with the priority areas, clarity of deliverables and, where appropriate, end-user engagement.

If successful, proposals will be assessed against excellence and originality, using international peer review. This will account for 80% of public competitive funding, to ensure consistency across agencies and programmes.

Greater government steering

While not unique, developments in Ireland represent a significant move towards greater government steering of both higher education and the research system.

Emphasis on performance of the system as a whole is admirable in a world obsessed with world-class universities, but it could cramp virtuous ambitions and institutional autonomy.

Given limitations on the state’s capacity to fund mass public higher education at a time of accelerating global competitiveness, the for-profit sector may provide relief, but will alter the character of the system.

Emphasis on research relevance with a focus on short-term job creation and innovation has implications for research and institutional structures, educational programmes and academic careers. It represents a significant shift from higher education as human capital development underpinning civil society, to being an arm of industrial policy.

Some of these developments will positively encourage quality specialisation rather than sheer comprehensiveness, but they could equally affect the breadth and balance across disciplinary provision and Ireland's attractiveness for international talent and investment.

Ireland offers an interesting case study.

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