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Book Review of No Artificial Limits: Ireland's Regional Technical Colleges (Thorn, R. 2018)

Anne Murphy

Technological University Dublin, anne.murphy@tudublin.ie

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NO ARTIFICIAL LIMITS

Ireland's Regional Technical Colleges

Author:	Richard Thorn
Year of publication:	2018
Publisher:	Institute of Public Administration, Dublin
ISBS (paperback)	978-1-910393-20-8
Pages	229

This book surely must be regarded as one of the most relevant and timely books published about Irish higher education in a long time. Its arrival coincides with frenetic developments in the sector around re-casting Institutes of Technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology, as universities of technology. As I write this 'review' an international 'review panel' is in Dublin to examine the case for the merger of three Institutes of Technology, namely the Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown and Institute of Technology Tallaght, into a single, university of technology entity, yet to be named. It is also being written the week following a televised session of the Dáil Public Accounts Committee regarding, among other matters, oversight of expenditure on the processes of preparing for an application for university of technology status in the Cork-Kerry region, and on the actual status of such new types of university vis-à-vis existing universities in the state. So, the book sits on the cusp of tremendous ideological, legal and operational change in the sector and is a riveting read in this regard.

So, where can one start reviewing such an extensive piece of research, analysis and commentary as is Thorn's publication? As a historian myself I relish such books for their detailed narrative, citations, references, insights, the synthesis of information. As an education practitioner and policy analyst who started my career in the VEC sector in the early 1970s and am still loyal to that ideological space, I found the contents of the book both

emotionally upsetting and intellectually provocative on many levels, though I should confess to not having read each chapter with equal intensity. It is likely that academics from the sector of my own vintage will have similar reactions to the book's content. In particular, it is continuously upsetting to admit that education is consistently a site of power struggles and that the powerful private, faith-based school system and the traditional university sector will always decide the shape of the entire system, and with it determine the life-chances of so many. It reinforces for me that there is an attitude of entitlement, classism and unpleasant pride that pervades the power-elites here. As an illustration, I recently presented findings from research undertaken as an element of an Erasmus+ project regarding inclusion of non-formal qualifications in the national framework. As part of the response from the university sector, my own higher education organisation was described a 'a respectable provider' with whom the university sector could happily co-operate! So, in a way, Thorn's story of the lifespan of regional technical colleges is itself a somewhat sad tale of bringing the horse to water but not letting it drink!

No doubt each reader of a certain vintage and working experience who takes on the enjoyable challenge of reading the details in Thorn's book will react somewhat as I did. Younger practitioners in the sector, scholars and researchers will delight in the careful garnering of details and in analysis of those details to create the narrative. But, I find myself in agreement with Thorn's commentary in the final chapter:

'As the institutes owe their genesis as regional technical colleges to the visionary thinking in the 1960s approaches the fiftieth anniversary of their opening, they are faced with existential challenges that go to the heart of their identity and financial challenges that threaten their existence'. Page 191

Thorn seems torn on predicting the futures of the colleges under current meta-planning models, as I am. But, again, we live in challenging times, even if the dominant paradigm of education planning has shifted far from the radical humanistic ideology of the original VEC concept in the early years of the state. The sector is now indeed 'traumatised' as Thorn concludes.

Reviewer: Dr Anne Murphy,

Higher Education Policy Research Unity (HEPRU), Dublin Institute of Technology