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Title	Irish Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy
Publication Date	2009
Publication Information	Coate, K. and MacLabhrainn, M. (2009) Irish Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy. In Huisman, J. (Ed) International Perspectives on the Governance of Higher Education: Alternative Frameworks for Coordination. London: Routledge.
Publisher	Routledge
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1822">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/1822</a>

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## 12

## Irish Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy

KELLY COATE AND IAIN MAC LABHRAINN

### The Idea

A historian of higher education in Ireland once suggested: “memories are long in Ireland and . . . the weight of history is a burden difficult to unload” (Lydon, 1991: 51). A large part of this history is the “weight” of religion and its influence on the shaping of the education system. Most memories in Ireland are imprinted with the knowledge that the largest university (University College Dublin) developed from the Catholic University of Ireland, established in 1854 with the influential John Henry Newman as its founding rector. The diversity in the system for centuries was not about academic versus vocational orientations, but rather Catholic versus Anglican (Trinity College Dublin), versus the “godless” Queen’s Colleges. Indeed, it was not until the 1960s that the Catholic Church entirely lifted the ban on Catholics attending Trinity College, and the influence of religion in the education system was still being challenged by the OECD report on Irish education in 1965.

Since he wrote *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal Newman has been widely regarded as one of the strongest proponents of the ideals of a liberal education. Yet his ideas have been appropriated in ways which do not acknowledge the profound conservatism at the heart of his vision. According to Newman, the purpose of the university should be centered on teaching, rather than research (in contrast to the Humboldtian model). He felt that universities should shape the intelligence of youth, such that: “A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom . . . This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a University” (Newman, 1955: 26). In effect, his idea was that while the university would cultivate the intellect of young gentlemen through the sharing of knowledge, it would not necessarily pursue a critical paradigm or the production of new knowledge (Readings, 1997; Blackmore, 2001).

In more recent years in Ireland, any remnants of Newman’s vision have been transformed by the now dominant model of economic growth driven through science, technology and innovation. The economic boom of the so-called Celtic Tiger brought rapid change. It can be hard to imagine that Ireland’s recent history was one of “deep despair” with the need for a “strategy to escape from the vicious circle of stagnation, unemployment, emigration, rising taxes and debt” (O’Donnell and Thomas, 2006: 110). The economic policies of the 1980s helped fuel the socio-economic changes that included the transition from an elite to a mass system of

higher education. From ideology to the knowledge economy: the changes in this small but newly affluent country have been remarkable.

While Newman was carefully shaping the minds of a few Catholic men in the mid-nineteenth century, he could scarcely have imagined the role that universities would come to play in Ireland in what has now become widely recognized as a knowledge-based society. There are nearly 180,000 students registered at about thirty-five different tertiary institutions (HEA, 2008a), with a budget of €550 million spent on research and development in higher education institutions in 2005 (Forfás, 2006). One agency alone (Science Foundation Ireland) has responsibility for the advancement of biotechnology and information and communication technologies (ICTs), and was given a budget of €1.4 billion in the National Development Plan 2007–2013. The “special fruit” that the government now wishes universities to bear is technological innovation, research and development, focusing on the skill levels necessary to create and sustain a knowledge economy.

Indeed, the rhetoric of the knowledge economy (see Bullen, Robb and Kenway, 2004; Bullen, Fahey and Kenway, 2006; Kenway, Bullen and Robb, 2004) is the key defining feature of recent change and at the core of current government policy with regards to higher education. While increased state expenditure on research and development during the 1990s was an inducement to universities to contribute to economic growth, direct state intervention in the affairs of the universities was relatively minimal throughout this time. The government has, however, been strongly criticized by some (OECD, 2006) for its lack of a unified strategy for the whole of the higher education sector. The latest Strategic Plan for the Higher Education Authority (2008–2010) does acknowledge that a national strategy for the sector is now required (HEA, 2008b), in a somewhat circular logic. This illustrates that there is a widely perceived lack of vision from government as to future directions of the system, and in such a small country the lack of coherence might be surprising to international observers.

The lack of coherence within the governance of the system is in part due to the historical growth of the sector through a patchwork of social, religious, cultural and economic interests. The concept of institutional autonomy with respect to both management and strategy is one that is deeply embedded. If institutional autonomy is seen as a means of conservative resistance to change, it is of course problematic for government and the state. However, it may also be argued that guarantees of autonomy could place the Irish universities at an advantage in comparison with other national systems, if there is appropriate reciprocity in terms of responsibility (see, e.g., Browne, 2008) and genuine efforts towards mutual collaboration when it serves the “national interest.” As Gornitzka and Maassen (2000) found in their research on changing relationships between governments and higher education systems, the Irish system is in transition. This chapter will therefore suggest that the question of governance of higher education in Ireland is at a crossroads: it will either follow the path of other Western European countries in accepting a stronger evaluative role from the state, or it will pursue and defend historical traditions of self-regulation and institutional autonomy. To understand how this position has been reached, it is necessary to chart some of the recent history.

200 • Kelly Coate and Iain Mac Labhrainn

### **The Contemporary Landscape**

The architecture of the current system was defined by the Universities Act of 1997 and consists of seven universities, thirteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs), and several specialist colleges. In an instance somewhat characteristic of the unruly nature of Irish higher education, the 1997 act designated the federal system, National University of Ireland, as consisting of four institutions in Dublin, Maynooth, Cork and Galway. Their designated, legally recognized titles are NUI Dublin, NUI Maynooth, NUI Cork and NUI Galway. Anyone familiar with universities in Ireland will know that only two of these – Maynooth and Galway – have accepted their designated titles, with the other two having retained, for operational purposes, their historical names of University College Cork and University College Dublin. Although this may be a somewhat superficial example, it seems that even a government act could not bring the universities entirely into line with their plans for a more coherent national system.

There are other historical anomalies. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) stood outside the fold for several centuries, having been founded as a charter corporation by Queen Elizabeth I in 1592. As such, it enjoyed greater autonomy than the other colleges, but was also perceived, because of its ties to the Anglican Church, as not being wholly part of Ireland (Lydon, 1991). A government decision in 1968 to merge Trinity with University College Dublin would have brought TCD into the state's legislative framework for higher education. It also would have enabled the long history of Trinity's outsider status within Ireland to be corrected. The proposal was unsuccessful, because of opposition within TCD (Clancy, 1989) and the institution continued to enjoy its special place in the higher education system until the Universities Act of 1997. This move was seen by some as a threat to the autonomy of TCD (Barrett, 2001), which until that time was governed by an academic oligarchy.

The academic opposition to the bill preceding the Universities Act of 1997 was mainly made on the grounds that it would give unprecedented power to the state to "interfere" in the running of universities. Academics from TCD were the most vocal in opposing the bill, and the Minister for Education eventually backed down on many of the powers that the act would have given to the Higher Education Authority (HEA). In particular, the proposal for an external quality assurance mechanism was dropped in favor of enabling universities to conduct their own internal quality audits. One politician at the time described the episode as "a textbook case of how not to deal with legislation" (Walshe, 1999: 152). Historically, therefore, the university sector has been very effective in standing up to increased state control. The autonomy of the individual universities is now legally safeguarded by the 1997 act.

Government plans have been more coherently and purposefully carried out in the expansion of the vocational and business-oriented arms of the sector, however. The establishment of Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the 1970s, in particular, supplied distinctive vocational, technical and sub-degree provisions on a regional basis. Two institutes of higher education (the NIHEs) were also established during

this phase of expansion, but were later designated as universities in 1989: the University of Limerick and Dublin City University. The RTCs were re-designated as Institutes of Technology in the late 1990s. Again, there are historical quirks in the system. The Dublin Institute of Technology is not a former RTC, it carries its own validation powers, and it awards degrees up to doctoral level. The other IoTs receive validation through the Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) and tend to focus on sub-degree provision (although there is academic drift in the sector).

The diversity within such a small system was noted by the OECD *Review of Higher Education in Ireland* which was carried out in 2003 and has been widely cited since (OECD, 2006). The report strongly recommended that some diversity is maintained through the distinctive (vocational, sub-degree) roles of the IoTs, but that the government establish a more unified steering mechanism for the whole sector. The distinctiveness of the IoTs has been a matter for recent debate: both Waterford IoT and DIT (and now, very recently, also Cork IoT) have been bidding and publicly campaigning for university status. If they are successful, the other IoTs will inevitably make a strong claim to be upgraded to university status as well, which is the pattern of events that occurred when the Waterford RTC became the first IoT. Indeed, one suggestion by the opposition political party is to unite the IoTs in a single “National University of Technology.” It is interesting to note that some considerable opposition to such re-designations has come from the school teachers’ unions, who fear the implications for sub-degree level vocational training and apprenticeships which historically were at the heart of the IoT sector’s success and indeed their *raison d’être* (Donnelly, 2008).

In spite of the academic drift of the IoTs, the system has become larger and more diverse in recent decades. Prior to the 1970s it was dominated by the university sector, which in 1969 accounted for 78 percent of total full-time enrollments (Clancy, 1997: 87). By 1986 nearly half of all new entrants into higher education were enrolling in the non-university sector (Clancy, 1989). Today the Irish system also includes an assortment of private providers of higher education, including the Dublin Business School, which is owned by the for-profit education company Kaplan Inc. and has over 9,000 students enrolled on its courses. A fascinating example of the appearance of the private sector on the scene was the controversy generated when Hibernia College began to offer a distance learning course for schoolteacher qualifications in 2003 (Burke, 2004). The university departments of education (the traditional providers of such accredited programs) in their opposition tended to focus not only on arguments about private versus public but (and, it could be argued, somewhat counter-productively, given international experience) on the use of distance learning and online technologies, claiming that it would not be possible to provide high-quality professional programs online. Despite this, the courses were given accreditation through HETAC, and large numbers of students enrolled on the program (Walshe, 2003).

The rate of growth in the period 1970–1990 was among the fastest in Europe (Clancy, 1997). Participation rates are the envy of other nearby countries: the age participation rate is about 57 percent and completion rates are also high. Among

## 202 • Kelly Coate and Iain Mac Labhrainn

the seven universities, historically there was limited competition for students, given that the non-Dublin universities tend to recruit largely from their regions. At University College Cork, for example, 90 percent of the full-time students are from the Cork region (HEA, 2005). However, competition for students may increase in the near future as the universities may find they no longer offer a higher education that cannot be obtained from other tertiary and private institutions. The latest strategic plan for higher education sets an ambitious participation rate target of 72 percent by 2020 (HEA, 2008b). Already, in recent years, there has been a considerable increase in advertising, branding and marketing of individual institutions, something particularly visible in the run-up to the undergraduate applications deadline (a process which is centrally administered by the Central Applications Office).

The expansion and diversification of the sector may have been recent, rapid and dramatic, but it is worth bearing in mind that the system is still relatively small. There are fewer students in the whole Irish system than there are, for example, in the Open University in the UK, or enrolled in courses through the private, US distance learning provider, the University of Phoenix. Given that the whole of the system could be managed as a single entity, it makes its quirkiness and diversity that much more remarkable and, perhaps, enviable in some senses. The role of the government in steering the state should not, in theory, be that difficult to manage. Yet institutional sensitivities around status, combined with rapid economic growth and a tradition of university autonomy (and even resistance), have resulted in a sector which the state funds relatively generously but does not control.

### Who is Steering the Sector?

In principle, the HEA, which was given its statutory functions of advising and monitoring the state investment in higher education in 1972 (modeled on the British University Grants Committee, as a buffer between state and institutions), is responsible for directing the sector. The funding model in Ireland was therefore designed to enable a large degree of autonomy for the universities, which they have mostly enjoyed (Clancy, 1989), and the HEA is still evolving into a more directive, steering role.

The non-university institutions were previously funded and directly steered through the Department of Education – not the HEA – yet the HEA was given the function of advising the government on the development of the entire sector (Osborne, 1996). The historical overlapping remit of a state agency and a government department is somewhat typical of the rather *ad hoc* fashion in which the Irish system has developed. Clancy noted that “the most striking anomaly in the administrative structure of Irish higher education is that the HEA does not have any executive role with respect to a large segment of the higher education system” (Clancy, 1989: 112). This was the case even after the Commission on Higher Education’s report of 1960–1967 recommended the establishment of the HEA and clearly intended that all third level colleges would be designated under the act. In the ensuing years, several reviews and reports have recommended better

coordination of the sector in terms of unified strategies, most notably the influential and oft-quoted OECD review (2006) discussed above, which was finally achieved in 2006 with IoTs coming under the remit of the HEA.

Clancy (2007) has argued that such a development will add to an increasingly interventionist tendency that began in the 1990s. Ironically, it is also likely that the IoTs will now begin to enjoy greater autonomy than they had under the Department of Education, with its heavily bureaucratic structures. There will inevitably be differences of perception across the sector as to the extent to which the HEA may intervene in institutional affairs.

The overall level of institutional autonomy, however, is impressive, given that about 80 percent of the universities' income comes straight from the public purse. A further recommendation of the OECD report that has yet to be fulfilled is the diversification of funding through private income and student fees. Politically, the issue of fees is sensitive, given that they were only abolished in 1996, but the government has announced that a review will be included within the forthcoming national strategy, along with an exploration of mechanisms to encourage greater private income (Flynn, 2008a). While internationally it has been claimed that fee waivers largely benefit the middle classes, recent evidence in Ireland shows that there has been some progress in widening student diversity and participation from "non-traditional" socio-economic groups (O'Connell, 2003).

The OECD report also made it quite clear that the overall level of state support for education is too low to match Ireland's aspirations, and is poor as a proportion of GDP with comparison to other countries. The same point was raised in a recent article in the *Irish Times* co-authored by the president of UCD (the state's largest university) and the provost of TCD (the oldest university), in which they highlighted the apparent mismatch between low levels of funding and the "Government rhetoric which envisages 'world-class' institutions driving a new 'knowledge society'" (Flynn, 2008b). It is noteworthy that this criticism came from these two institutions (both of which have publicly asserted their desire to ascend the international league tables) rather than, for example, under the auspices of the sectoral umbrella organization, the Irish Universities Association.

The HEA is therefore in the driving seat for the university sector, but it has not gripped the wheel too tightly. As a buffer organization, it does not directly steer the system, but inevitably changes in its funding mechanisms and strategies do have an impact, and this will certainly be the case for the new resource allocation model which is currently being phased in. However, uncertainty in the availability of special initiative and research funds being released by the Department of Finance in previous years has also acted as a limiter on the HEA's ability to manage the sector. The additional impact of changing individual Ministers of Education and Finance Ministers can be very significant and hints at an intrinsic instability in a system that is dependent on large part on annual budgeting and planning in the absence of a longer-term strategy.

Clancy's (2007) article on the evaluative state in Irish higher education illuminates the process of a creeping state interventionism in the university sector. He points out that although the Universities Bill was substantially altered after the

protest from academics, this may have been something of a Pyrrhic victory, as a managerialist ethos has still seemingly entered Irish higher education through the back door. Certainly there are voices within higher education who claim that the administrators are taking over the universities. In a collection of writings on universities in the new millennium, for example, one author states that in the 1990s, “we had a decade of unprecedented legislative, administrative and bureaucratic interference in the scholarly and collegiate functions of our universities” (Barrett, 2001: 81). Those familiar with managerialism in other systems, such as the UK’s (as described in, for example, Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007), may find this sounds rather overblown, but within the context of rapid change in Irish higher education it probably captures how some changes have been felt by those within the system.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that an important aspect of the contemporary Irish context is that national economic and social policy develops through the mechanism of “social partnership.” Therefore, some of the evaluative and regulatory functions that the state has assumed in relation to higher education were agreed through partnerships with trade unions, employers and other participants in the process. Social partnership works through the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), which was established in 1973 with a mandate to advise government on social and economic policy, and this has become a valued aspect of Irish governmental processes. The NESC includes representatives from the employers’ associations, trade unions, farmers’ organizations and senior civil servants. In 1997 this was widened to include representation from community and voluntary organizations.

Issues which impinge on working practices would be part of the negotiations for social partnership, along with agreements over salary/wage increases, etc. The largest trade union in the country, SIPTU, also includes a significant number of academic staff from the higher education sector, and within individual universities it is organized in separate branches for administrative, technical and academic staff. Indeed, in at least one case the secretary of the education branch of the union ultimately became a university president, something which may well be unusual in an international context. The SIPTU education branch has been very critical of managerialism and top-down performance management systems, mainly in relation to research (SIPTU, 2007). A publication called *Universities or Knowledge Factories* is highly critical of citation indexes and the UK’s former Research Assessment Exercise, even though there is little indication that Irish universities will face such a heavily bureaucratic assessment system. Yet the publication is mostly silent on the performance assessment of teaching, perhaps because in recent local partnership discussions, there has been agreement on certain measures which will encourage more transparent processes within promotion policies that include more systematic student/teaching evaluation mechanisms. Arguably, however, these initiatives are being felt on the ground to be causing greater individual anxiety about surveillance and auditing.

As with many public sector systems in Western Europe, a language of performance management has infiltrated the working practices of academic life in Irish universities. University league tables have raised awareness of how certain

outputs, particularly in terms of research, can be measured. Indeed, it is the influence of global league tables with which SIPTU is most concerned, and there is a danger that some universities will start playing the game of trying to boost performance indicators for research. The system of internal quality audits that universities have established has also inevitably brought changes that are sometimes experienced (or perceived) as bureaucratic rather than academic in nature. Those who are critical of managerialism tend to perceive this shift as part-and-parcel of a neo-liberal agenda within higher education policy (see Lynch, 2006a and 2006b). This agenda brings market discourses into education and a value on the outputs and performances of institutions within a competitive environment. Others would suggest that these moves are about good management rather than managerial control. The president of DCU has recently stated that the dichotomous view of academic autonomy versus managerialism is false and that there is scope for a “pragmatic” middle ground (von Prondzynski, 2008).

The HEA's Strategic Innovation Fund, launched in 2006 (and with a total planned allocation of €510 million over seven years), provides a further example of recent trends indicative of a greater awareness of institutional management issues. The funding available is being used to facilitate (or accelerate) internal institutional restructuring and supports a large number of collaborative projects which include the development of key performance indicators, standardization of learning outcomes and program specifications in modular frameworks, and the development of structured doctoral programs with a strengthened emphasis on transferable skills and employability. Indeed, the latter of these reflects widening acceptance of the concept of “fourth level Ireland” (IUA, 2007) built on increasing uptake of Master's and doctoral programs (a target for the doubling of Ph.D. graduates is one feature of this). It is interesting to note that many such projects have come from the universities themselves (or at least senior management teams) in response to this availability of funds, and it may be that the strategy is at least to influence the shape of “the inevitable.”

Certainly these are trends that are familiar in other Western countries. There have been many critical voices raised against the marketization and consumerist framework of higher education in England (e.g., Deem, 2001; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005), and given the close ties between the UK and Ireland it is not surprising that some of the policies that now predominate in England are being discussed in Ireland. Yet governance of the Irish higher education system, in comparison with the English system, is remarkably non-evaluative and weak as an external regulator of the sector. The “creeping managerialism” is not being imposed by the state in the same way as it has been imposed in other systems. Instead, the university sector has effectively opposed managerialism in the past (through opposition to government plans for an external quality assurance system, for instance) and there is not much indication that the state has the strength to increase its control in the future. Rather than see this as a weakness in the system, as the OECD report (2006) inevitably concluded, however, it perhaps could be interpreted as a positive aspect of the Irish situation insofar as the institutions are more empowered than their equivalents in other jurisdictions to influence their future in policy terms.

## 206 • Kelly Coate and Iain Mac Labhrainn

What is perhaps of more concern is the rather relentless discussion of the knowledge economy and the role of higher education in fostering the knowledge-based economy. This particular emphasis within policy and strategy documents has focused on the economic contributions of higher education through research and innovation in the sciences and technologies. Yet there are problems inherent in this vision for higher education, in that the knowledge economy is more of an idea constructed through particular discourses than a coherent strategy for a higher education system. Emerging concerns highlight the emphasis on the economy at the possible expense of society; the fragmentation and lack of coordination of funding streams for research in the drive to pursue innovation; and the possible threat to the humanities and social science subject areas.

### **The Imperatives of the Knowledge Economy**

It is difficult to find any policy or strategy documents about higher education in Ireland that do not emphasize the importance of higher education in contributing to the knowledge economy. The HEA's strategy provides a good overview of the context and the current emphasis:

Ireland has made considerable progress economically and socially in recent years. We have done so through a mix of policies, incorporating social partnership, pro-enterprise taxation policies, the attraction of foreign direct investment and technology, and improved systems of public governance and administration . . . If Ireland as a society and an economy is to continue to develop, we must urgently adopt the strategies necessary to create a dynamic, knowledge-based, innovative and inclusive society.

(HEA, 2004: 6)

This short statement captures the essence of the “received wisdom” within Ireland as to the reasons why it has undergone such an economic about-turn in the last decade or so and the individual items listed are echoed time and again in official strategy documents from various public agencies and government departments. Such language is also expected in applications for funding for research in higher education even beyond the specific subject disciplines of science, engineering and technology. It is also commonly observed that while reference is usually also made to an “inclusive society,” it usually comes last in such statements.

There are many other examples of this type of rhetoric. The Science Foundation Ireland strategy, for example, acknowledges that the key challenge facing Irish higher education is the development of the knowledge economy (SFI, 2006). Similarly, the Forfás (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment) report on *Building Ireland's Knowledge Economy* proposed that “Ireland by 2010 will be internationally renowned for the excellence of its research and will be at the forefront in generating and using new knowledge for economic and social progress, within an innovation driven culture” (Forfás, 2004: 2). In the NESC (the social partnership agency which advises government on social policy) *Towards 2016*

partnership program (Government of Ireland, 2006), the NESC's vision to develop "a vibrant, knowledge-based economy and stimulating enterprise and productivity" is set out (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2006: 129).

One of the main strategic aims of the HEA is to encourage the economic contribution that higher education makes to Irish society, describing the new role of universities as "engines of economic growth" (HEA, 2004: 20). The recent history of the Irish "economic miracle" has reinforced the perception of the important contribution that universities can make to the economy. However, the role of universities in generating the "economic miracle" can be questioned. At first glance, the increased rates of participation in higher education are hugely impressive. In the 1960s, an Irish person (twenty-five years or older) had spent on average just six and a half years in education. By 2010, it has been forecast that over 40 percent of the working population will hold a third-level qualification (Ferreira and Vanhoudt, 2004).

The incredible rate of upskilling among the young population has been attributed with fueling to a large extent the Celtic Tiger. Yet, as Ferreira and Vanhoudt (2004) also point out, increased higher education attainment levels alone do not explain the economic boom, given that Ireland's expansion is comparable to other OECD countries during this time, and is not as impressive as the growth in countries such as Norway. What was distinctive about the Irish case was the government's supply-side strategy in the technological sector and through the Regional Technical Colleges (Clancy, 1989; Ferreira and Vanhoudt, 2004). Therefore, it is perhaps not the universities which should be exhorted to fulfill the promises of a knowledge economy, but the IoTs. Yet the decisive government strategy to expand the technological sector throughout the 1970s and 1980s has not led to a firm commitment to protect that investment: instead, the IoT sector is currently somewhat in limbo until the HEA assumes full responsibility for its funding and there is greater clarity as to roles and structures within the merged system.

The link between universities, economic growth, innovation, knowledge and technological advancement seems now to be a widely held perception: "The role of the university has changed radically in the new innovation age because of the heightened strategic importance of education in a society which is now truly knowledge-driven" (Kinsella and McBrierty, 1998: 111). A key characteristic of a knowledge-driven economy is that technology is no longer just imported, but is generated. Research within the universities should support this transition in the Irish economy, according to the HEA, and a direct government role is a presumed requirement to foster higher rates of innovation.

These economic imperatives have, of course, been noted in other higher education systems. As Bullen, Fahey and Kenway (2006: 54) argue, the discourses around knowledge economies are now powerful drivers of policy in many countries: "such policies typically represent knowledge economy initiatives as the way to economic prosperity, scientific progress, social inclusion, and unprecedented global inter-connectivity." They have become especially prominent through the European Commission and the OECD, with the latter putting the term firmly on

the agenda when it published its report *The Knowledge-based Economy* (OECD, 1996). Subsequently, the OECD has promoted the rhetoric of the knowledge economy in many of its publications, and certainly this is a key feature of its review of Irish higher education.

The Lisbon Strategy of the European Union has also been influential. The intention for Europe to become the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by 2010 seems to have been embraced by the government of the day. A recent announcement of a €100 million government spend on higher education under the Strategic Innovation Fund was said to be a “key part of the Government’s plan for Ireland to move towards the knowledge economy envisaged for the EU under the Lisbon Agenda” (Anderson, 2008). Knowledge-based economies depend on people with high levels of technological and scientific skills. One Irish response has been, for example, to aim to double the numbers of Ph.D. graduates by 2013 (in all disciplines, however, including arts and humanities), which is hugely ambitious given some of the infrastructural problems that are known to exist.

Worthy of note here is that probably two of the currently most influential documents in Irish higher education were produced outside of Ireland. The OECD review was conducted by international experts and the Lisbon Strategy is, of course, a development plan for the European Union. The strongest steers, perhaps, are therefore not coming from national but from supranational directives. It remains to be seen whether the proposed new national strategy for higher education may set out a vision for Irish higher education that establishes more independence and confidence within the Irish system itself.

### Critical Voices

There are a few dissenting voices amid the knowledge economy rhetoric. The emphasis on the economic contribution of Irish higher education has prompted some questions about the role of higher education as a public good (see Lynch, 2006a and 2006b; Fisher, 2006). There are also some political parties outside of government who oppose the knowledge economy agenda-setting of the European Union, and the 2008 referendum on the Lisbon Treaty shows that political leaders cannot afford to be complacent. Yet Ireland generally promotes a pro-European stance: indeed, some have argued that only through membership of the then EEC did Ireland really become “independent” – its trade and financial systems being previously dominated by relations with the UK. There is more tolerance of the concept of European policy than, for example, would be the case in the UK or other larger countries. To a large extent, however, there is little academic or public debate (other than perhaps within the letters pages of the *Irish Times*) about the changing role of higher education in Ireland as envisaged through the Lisbon Agenda.

Kathleen Lynch (2006a) has raised concerns about the ways in which the social role of higher education seems to take a back seat to the economic. She argues: “Throughout the [OECD] report on Irish HE this focus is on developing a skilled workforce for the economy. There is no reference in the body of the report to the

role of the universities in developing the civil, political, social or cultural institutions of society, either locally or globally” (2006a: 305). This is not necessarily a new concern, as Clancy drew attention to the lack of attention to the cultural and social roles of higher education throughout the expansion period in the 1970s (see Clancy, 1989).

Yet, a key strategic aim of the government is widening participation in higher education. Reconciling economic growth with social cohesiveness can be a tall order. Indeed, the social inclusion agenda could even be argued to be in conflict with knowledge economy policies, given that the latter tend to focus attention on technological innovation and the economic returns of education, sometimes at the expense of greater inclusivity.

As Brine’s analysis (2006) of discourses around the knowledge-based economy in Europe suggests, it is the lower-skilled learners who tend to be negatively defined within knowledge economy policies. Her close analysis of European policies shows that low-skilled learners are categorized as not only “at risk” but “*the risk*” to the increased economic capacity of Europe. In other words, their very existence threatens the future of greater economic competitiveness. Furthermore, she suggests that the high-skilled learners are clearly prioritized in discourses around the knowledge *economy*, whereas the lower-skilled learners are located in the knowledge *society*. Lower-skilled members of society have little economic value, and as such are constructed through discourses of deficiency. Her clarification of these points is valuable for understanding the tensions within knowledge economy policies in relation to social inclusion.

Questions are being raised about the dual role that Irish HE might play: for some, the aim of economic advancement is not necessarily commensurate with an aim to develop social well-being (Fisher, 2006). Other social policy analysts in Ireland suggest that growth in the GDP has become an end of policy in itself, neglecting the social policies that would result in growth in people’s well-being (Healy and Reynolds, 2006). Certainly there are concerns that the new-found wealth has led to new-found inequalities: Ireland scores high on inequalities of income distribution in comparison with other rich European nations (Collins and Kavanagh, 2006: 165).

One significant means through which social concerns have been partly addressed in Irish higher education is through charitable donations from private philanthropies. The largest donor has been the Atlantic Philanthropies (a charitable foundation established by the creator of the duty free system). Nearly US\$7 million came into the Republic of Ireland from this charity between 1982 and 2004, and most of it went to higher education institutions for projects in non-science and technology topics (Khoo, Healy and Coate, 2007). Atlantic Philanthropies is undoubtedly promoting the role of higher education in relation to society and has funded projects on issues such as civic engagement, disadvantaged youth, and peace and reconciliation.

Important as charitable income has been, there are problems with it. To some extent, it may partly absolve the government’s responsibilities in relation to the funding of those higher education projects that are oriented towards social

well-being rather than economic growth (Khoo, Healy and Coate, 2007). It is also a non-strategic and non-accountable form of funding, given that donations are made largely to suit the strategies and aims of the charitable organizations rather than national priorities. Perhaps the most significant weakness is sustainability, with Atlantic Philanthropies in particular choosing to spend its entire endowment by 2020.

Another concern is the impact that market-driven strategies might have on universities themselves to pursue the production of disinterested knowledge and other forms of traditional scholarship. For example, Kenway and colleagues (2004) argue that economic imperatives for universities will damage their core, scholarly business. The academic system, they suggest, should be based on a “gift” economy rather than a knowledge economy: “Current knowledge economy policies and innovation systems tend to ignore the distinctive features of universities and scholarly communities and, in so doing, they put in peril aspects of what they seek to achieve” (2004: 331). The erosion of a “public good” ethos within higher education through the predominance of economic imperatives is arguably a hidden danger of knowledge economy discourses.

### **The Knowledge Economy and Research**

Public investment in research in higher education institutions is still a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland. One result of the Celtic Tiger economy was a government decision to develop a research infrastructure and funding mechanism for research from the late 1990s. Within these new developments were the establishment of SFI, with its role in developing biotechnology and ICT; the creation of two research councils, one in the science and technologies and one for the humanities and social sciences; and the introduction of the Program for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI) from 1998.

As with other changes in the system over recent decades, these new funding mechanisms have dramatically altered the management and development of research within the universities and the IoTs. There are several distinctive features about the ways in which these funding streams operate. First, they tend to be programmatic, cyclical, short-term and often require matched funding from the institutions. The research councils are less prone to these tendencies, given that they are more oriented towards developing general research capacity within the sector, but they operate with more modest budgets than SFI or the PRTLTI. The latter two are in their second and fifth cycles of funding, respectively, and, according to some, herald an “introduction of unbridled market principles into the steering of higher education” (Clancy, 2007: 116).

SFI and the PRTLTI are fairly instrumental in terms of encouraging competition between institutions for the funding of projects for which the state has given the steer. Given the small size of the higher education sector, economies of scale are deemed important and therefore institutions need to bid for these funds through collaborative partnerships. Indeed, the HEA defines one of its main roles as: “Creating a context conducive to healthy differentiation and specialisation within

the sector, with competition and collaboration as appropriate among institutions in the interest of achieving efficiencies, economies of scale and critical mass across the sector” (HEA, 2004: 21). The OECD review pointed to the “dramatic way” in which the PRTL highlighted the importance of competition and the value that “can spring from collaboration” (OECD, 2006: 64).

The resulting mix of competition and collaboration is dramatic, but perhaps not in the terms of success that the OECD and HEA would prefer to view it. The imperative to collaborate is top-down rather than bottom-up, meaning that the strategic development of funding bids has a heavily weighted steer from senior management rather than necessarily growing organically from the work of existing research teams. Collaboration is also encouraged between the universities and the IoT sector, which is laudable in theory but in practice raises a host of sensitivities. Although the funds are for collaborative efforts, only one institution can be the lead partner, thereby increasing the competitive aspect of bidding between institutions who desire to come out of the funding cycle with the most monies in their coffers.

The sustainability of funded initiatives and ongoing evaluations of how the funds are spent are also large concerns that have yet to be truly tackled. Especially in comparison to the monitoring that takes place elsewhere (such as through EU funding), there is a very low level of evaluation or assessment of how public funds are spent through these programs. In addition, the various funding mechanisms for research and development are fragmented rather than coordinated. The recent strategic plan for the HEA (2008) certainly makes it clear that the HEA has a key role to play in terms of ensuring accountability for the efficient expenditure of public funds. These statements may precipitate a greater evaluative role of the state in future; the resistance in the past to these types of move may again create challenges for the state.

### **Conclusion: A System at the Crossroads?**

Ireland is a small, monolithic and centralized state (no regional devolution or strong local government, for example) with a successful economy and a small number of geographically distributed universities, and a larger number of other higher education providers whose offerings are strongly linked with industrial and commercial needs. On paper, then, government steering and management of the sector and its embedding within, for example, the National Development Plan should be straightforward and provide the country with the basis of a nimble and agile approach to policy and practice that many larger states cannot achieve because of their size, complexity, historical tradition and cultural and economic inertia.

In practice, however, few will recognize this as a realistic picture of the Irish situation, and perhaps cultural factors play more strongly than is sometimes appreciated by external observers such as the OECD review team. Irish civil society is partially fragmented on geographical/regional lines and there is a strong tradition of (non-party political) associations, organizations and other groupings (including the Catholic Church) having a voice in the public sphere, even when in the current situation it would seem that the language of the so-called neo-liberal agenda seems

## 212 • Kelly Coate and Iain Mac Labhrainn

at face value to have gained hegemonic acceptance. Any understanding of the Irish situation requires consideration of its “non-ideological” politics and the widespread acceptance of populism and economic opportunism as major factors in decision-making and strategy formulation as well as the historical particularities of the development of Irish identity and the relations of citizens to the state (e.g., Tovey and Share, 2003; Inglis, 2000; Keohane and Kuhling, 2004).

The higher education system is substantially funded by the public purse and provides a service for the state in educating largely an Irish population of students, and yet politically the state espouses much of the rhetoric, at least, of a market economy. However, the associated evaluative function of the state is minimal in comparison with, for example, its closest neighbors in the UK (who have set the global standard for managerialism in higher education). An associated irony is that the most decisive government strategy of recent decades, the supply-led expansion of the technological sector, has not fully resulted in a commitment to protect the distinct role that the IoTs have contributed to the economy.

One interpretation of the situation could be that academics in Irish universities, thus far, have appropriately managed to resist an erosion of their core scholarly business and more centralized state control. The imposition of an external quality assurance mechanism, for instance, was not deemed necessary and the resulting internal quality assurance procedures have maintained a degree of professional autonomy within the sector that would probably be welcomed elsewhere, given the choice. The enshrining of academic freedom in the Universities Act of 1997 was also an important gain. What is perhaps most interesting about the Irish context is the mixture of a government that is populist in its orientation with a fairly weak state control over universities, and a relatively strong voice in favor of university autonomy. Indeed, the Minister of Education who came under fire for the proposal of the Universities Bill, which provoked such a strong protest from TCD, acknowledges this bungled maneuver may have been the reason for her downfall. When she unsuccessfully campaigned for re-election in 1997, she recalls that: “It came up on the doorstep in a number of cases – little old dears asking me what I was trying to do to Trinity” (Walshe, 1999: 140).

As regards governance, then, Kearns (2002) suggests that the relationship between the Irish state and universities is “loosely coupled,” allowing latitude and scope for maneuver by either party. Historically, however, we have noted how the state has pushed one way on the universities and the universities have pushed back, reacting to perceived threats from proposed new laws, for example. State steering on a more routine basis has come through the agency of the HEA in the form of funding incentives and special initiatives rather than direct policy implementation. In addition, the governance of higher education in Ireland seems to have been strongly shaped by external influences, such as the OECD review and the aims of the Lisbon Agenda, rather than through the development of an indigenous, Irish vision for the system, despite the fact that there is space within the system for such a unique and self-conceived vision to take shape.

However, the economy, globalization and other international contextual factors have moved on considerably since 1997 and the key issue is which direction is

Ireland set to follow in shaping the future of its education systems. With government's enthusiastic adoption of the Lisbon Agenda, the embedding of the Bologna Process and a renewed focus on performance indicators and outcomes measures it might be presumed that it will follow the dominant pattern in much of the developed world of asserting the primacy of the knowledge economy, league tables and the commodification of education. The proposed new national strategy will be eagerly awaited, but whether there is sufficient proactive leadership and enough self-confidence within the sector to shape a strategy that is significantly different to the pattern in other developed nations is a very pertinent question. In addition, the particular roles of the arts, humanities and social sciences and their contribution to society need to be continuously reinforced and reflected in a higher education that values the transformative potential of the learning experience in terms other than the purely economic.

If it is to be more than a restatement of the prevalent economic values, the new strategy consultation process must facilitate a broader debate which seeks clarification of some of the tensions institutions face in terms, for example, of their regional versus international orientations; their contributions to the well-being of society versus their contributions to economic growth; their focus on academic development versus collaboration with industry; and maintaining academic freedom in the face of increased demands for accountability. If the strategy concentrates instead only on technical aspects of funding mechanisms (with fees likely to be mooted as one possible solution to financial constraints), implementing new performance measurements and statistical analysis, then it will be a missed opportunity for Ireland to strike out on a different and highly distinctive path; an opportunity which, unlike other countries, is still available to the sector should it choose to seize it.

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## 214 • Kelly Coate and Iain Mac Labhrainn

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## Irish HE and the Knowledge Economy • 215

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