

**In from the margins:
Development and internationalisation within Irish universities**

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Abstract

Universities in Ireland, as elsewhere, are under severe pressure – indeed in crisis according to some commentators. The nature of this crisis is two-fold. First, increasing enrolment figures coupled with dwindling state support leaves universities facing severe financial challenges. Second, and perhaps more critically, the very idea and fundamental role of the university is being challenged through the shifting nature of knowledge(s) and the changing needs of an increasingly complex global society.

University “internationalisation” policies and strategies, in remaining narrowly focused on raising revenue through fee-paying international students, are missing valuable opportunities for addressing these wider challenges. Despite the rapidly changed nature of society in Ireland, recent surveys indicate that graduates remain poorly equipped with the skills and knowledge to engage meaningfully with contemporary global issues both at home (e.g. migration, multiculturalism) and abroad (e.g. global trade policy, causes of civil unrest).

In the context of broader debates on the role of and function of universities within contemporary globalised societies, this paper argues for a broadening of the conception and resultant strategies of internationalisation to include a mainstreaming of development education so that Irish universities become more adept at fulfilling their mandates of equipping students with a set of knowledge, skills and values to allow them to contribute more fully and meaningfully to economic, political and social life, both at home and abroad. Drawing on the preliminary results of empirical research conducted by the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building within all nine universities on the island, the paper highlights both opportunities and constraints to such a mainstreaming. At a time when Irish universities face growing competition in the increasingly diverse field of knowledge production, and at a time when Ireland’s 0.7 per cent commitment is under threat, this paper offers some practical pointers for developing a greater global responsiveness and engagement within the Irish higher education sector.

Introduction

Universities in Ireland, as elsewhere, are facing severe challenges on a number of fronts. While, on the one hand, increasing enrolment figures coupled with dwindling state support leaves universities facing severe financial challenges, on the other, the very idea and fundamental role of the university is being challenged through the shifting nature of knowledge(s) and the changing needs of an increasingly complex global society. With traditional liberal beliefs about reason, knowledge, progress and universality being challenged by feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial thought, the role of universities as primary producers, determiners and transmitters of universal knowledge is challenged. Moreover, the exigencies of the new globalised knowledge economy favour a more vocational function for universities, with their role seen to lie in equipping students with the skills and capacities to engage productively in the globalised economy. Within this context, how relevant is the education we provide within our universities? How globally aware are our students? Are the strategies of internationalisation pursued in many universities sufficient in equipping students with the skills and knowledge to engage meaningfully with an increasingly complex, globalised society?

With survey evidence indicating a poor level of global awareness among students, both in Ireland (Connolly, Doyle and Dwyer, 2008) and more widely (see survey results from the UK, US, Japan, Mexico and a number of European countries in Lunn, 2008: 236-238), this paper argues that universities can become more relevant and effective at fulfilling their role in equipping students with the knowledge, skills and values to allow them to contribute more fully and meaningfully to economic, political and social life through a strategy mainstreaming development education across the higher education system. A distinction between such a strategy and that of

internationalisation is drawn, with development mainstreaming moving beyond policies targeting student enrolment alone to policies aimed at mainstreaming development and global perspectives in research, curricula and teaching across all faculties and disciplines. Drawing on the preliminary results of empirical research conducted by the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP)¹, the paper highlights both opportunities and constraints to such a mainstreaming within Ireland's nine universities.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section the nature of the challenges faced by higher education institutes, both in Ireland and more broadly, are examined. It is argued that, in order to meet these considerable challenges and remain viable and relevant, universities need to equip students and staff with the knowledge, capacities and skills to engage meaningfully and actively in the globalised world in which they reside and work. The second section of the paper goes on to briefly examine the rapidly changing nature of this globalised world in an Irish context and cites survey evidence which indicates a poor level of understanding of this world among Irish students. Following on from this, the third section draws on research carried out within the IAP to examine the opportunities and barriers to development research (which feeds into teaching) within the IAP's nine partner universities in Ireland (north and south).

¹ The Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building (IAP) is a partnership of all nine universities on the island of Ireland and four universities in Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda. Its aim is to develop a coordinated approach to research capacity building in order to make an effective contribution to poverty reduction in partner countries.

The university challenged: changing roles and functions in a globalised world

In 2005, a Special Report by the *Economist* (2005) identified four reasons why higher education is facing some fundamental challenges. First, the democratisation or “massification” of higher education means that ever-increasing numbers of people are demanding and gaining higher education qualifications; second, universities are regarded as key drivers of the knowledge economy; third, the globalised “death of distance” means that higher education has become an important export industry for a growing number of countries; and fourth, higher education institutions are facing increased competition as private companies break into the sector and compete for students. These factors combine to produce a sector under severe pressure, competing in an ever-broadening educational environment to attract students and funds and to establish their relevancy and niche within the contemporary, globalised knowledge economy. Indeed, through both the Bologna and Lisbon processes, these shifts have become the major drivers of higher education policy across Europe (Stensaker *et al*, 2008).

At a more epistemological level, the literature also points to the pressures faced by higher education institutions as they struggle to cope with the demise in the universality of knowledge together with the exigencies of the knowledge economy. Where some commentators see a narrowing of the aspirations and role of higher education with these developments, (see Blackmore, 2001 for a review of these), others see opportunities. Barnett (2005) for example, does not see an end to universals within the modern university in an era of postmodernity. In his view “*The new universal is precisely the capacity to cope, to prosper and to delight in a world in which there are no universals... And it is a task of – and challenge to – the university*

to provide those capacities.” (2005: 794). More specifically, Bartnett (2005: 795) advocates that research and teaching within contemporary universities take what he terms “*an ontological turn*”. This entails a shift “*From knowledge to being: instead of knowing the world, being-in-the-world has to take primary place in the conceptualisations that inform university teaching.*” (2005: 795). In practice, this means equipping students (and staff) with the competencies and capacities to comprehend, analyse and critically function in the increasingly interconnected yet complex world in which they do, or will, live and work.

These debates find resonance in ongoing debates about the role and function of higher education in Ireland where participation levels have increased dramatically over the last few decades – admission rates in 2003 and 2004 were well over twice the rate of those in 1980 (O’Connell et al, 2006:314), and in 2008, 34 per cent of the labour force in Ireland (aged 25-64) had completed some form of higher education, compared to 4 per cent in the early 1970s (NCC, 2009: 9). In a recent opinion piece in *The Irish Times*, former registrar and dean of engineering and architecture in UCD and founder/editor of the *International Journal of Industry and Higher Education* Professor John Kelly argues that “*there is a need for a debate to arrive at a thoughtful and forward-looking definition of the public purpose of higher education so that we have a clearer understanding of the role of the higher education institutions in our society.*” (Kelly, 2009). While the National Competitive Council is unequivocal that higher education plays a key role in Ireland’s successful competition within the global economy, it also acknowledges that “*education has an importance which transcends the economy...*” (NCC, 2009: 9), with wider benefits to individuals and society as a

whole. According to Kelly, the fundamental mission of the university in Ireland is “*the education of our young people to take a responsible role in society*”.

But what exactly does this mean, this “*responsible role*”? Drawing from the wider literature and debates in this area, it means educating students and graduates across the disciplines to engage in an informed and meaningful way with the increasingly globalised and interconnected world in which they live and work. Are Irish universities rising to this challenge? While evidence is scarce, the data which is available suggest not.

Changing Ireland and university responses

The rapidly changing face of modern Ireland, at work and at leisure, is no secret to anyone. The most recent census figures available on population and demographics document the increasing diversity of the island’s population with over 10 per cent of what is classified as “non-Irish” living in Ireland in 2006. The figures indicate that over 5 per cent of these come from countries in Africa and Asia (a breakdown for the Americas is not provided) (CSO, 2009). In a policy report on migration, NESC reports that there has been an approximate fourfold rise in gross inward migration from an estimated 17,200 in 1987 to 70,000 in 2005 (2006: 7). With foreign nationals accounting for 8.1 per cent of the national labour force in 2005 (NESC, 2006: 21 – Table 2.3), and over half (54.3 per cent) of immigrants estimated to have third-level qualifications (NESC, 2006:23), it is clear that many Irish graduates (who account for just over a quarter of the national population (NESC, 2006:23)) will, even if they remain in Ireland, come into regular contact in their working lives with people from different backgrounds, cultures and life experiences.

This likelihood is exacerbated by the extremely high proportion of foreign owned (and often managed) companies in Ireland. As Ruane and Buckley (2006) document, *“Ireland is unusual in the extent to which it has consistently promoted inward investment into the manufacturing sector for over four decades”*. The result is that multinational enterprises currently account for almost 50 per cent of manufacturing employment in Ireland. Targeting the educated labour market, these companies provide a livelihood and career for a great many graduates across the disciplines.

And so what do Irish graduates know and understand of the diverse backgrounds of their managers, co-workers and friends? What do they understand of the circumstances that brought them here, that encourage them to stay, and perhaps, that thwart them from leaving? Has their university education assisted them in understanding the global context in which the companies in which they work operate? The evidence from a recent survey of university students exploring attitudes towards and understandings of development cooperation (conducted in 2006-7) suggests not very well. Analysing survey findings, Connolly, Doyle and Dwyer (2008: 226) conclude that *“there is little evidence of any sophisticated understanding of development issues, or any capacity to rank different explanations of development”* and that there is a need *“to focus more on creating a better understanding of the causes of underdevelopment and the structural factors relating to interactions between wealthy and poor states.”* (2008: 209). These findings resonate with those conducted among university students elsewhere. Lunn (2008: 236-237) cites similar findings studies from studies carried out in the UK, Denmark, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden and the US where students are again found to have a

poor knowledge of contemporary global issues, current affairs, and other people, places and culture.

These findings are perhaps a little surprising given the increasing emphasis placed on “internationalisation” strategies and policies within universities worldwide. All Irish universities now have an International Office with policies and programmes in place to cater to international students. Considerable resources are channeled into attracting international students to Irish campuses, many from the so-called “developing” world. These strategies and programmes clearly offer valuable opportunities to globalise our universities. However, internationalisation appears to be narrowly equated with the attraction of international fee-paying students alone, or, in some instances, also the attraction of international research funding through partnerships with colleagues and institutions in other countries. A survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU), which represents over 650 universities and higher education institutes from countries across the globe, found mobility of students and teachers to be the most important facet of internationalisation policies and practices within their member institutions (Knight, 2003: 15-16). In Ireland, such policies and practices are clearly more influenced by the funding challenges facing universities than the wider questions regarding their ongoing relevance and social contribution. Given the significant challenges facing Irish universities, where funding issues cannot be separated from social relevance, it is perhaps time to broaden the conception and resultant strategies of internationalisation to include a mainstreaming of development within research and teaching curricula so that our universities may become more adept at fulfilling their mandates of equipping students with a set of knowledge, skills

and values to allow them to contribute more fully and meaningfully to economic, political and social life, both at home and abroad.

Such a mainstreaming of development within research in the nine universities on the island of Ireland is an aspiration of the IAP, a network bringing together researchers – predominantly in the areas of health and education – from all nine universities in Ireland and four universities in Africa² in a three-year programme funded through the Programme of Strategic Cooperation between Irish Aid and Higher Education and Research Institutes 2007-2011. One of the core activities carried out within the IAP has been an extensive consultation exercise with researchers and research managers within the thirteen partner institutions exploring the opportunities and barriers to development research within these institutions. Fieldwork for the consultation research was conducted over a 5 month period in 2008. During this time IAP researchers spent 3-4 days in each institution conducting individual and group interviews with over 300 research and senior administration staff. The following section sets out the main findings from this study in relation to the nine Irish institutions examined.

Opportunities and barriers to development research in Irish universities: Findings from an IAP study

The principle opportunities and barriers for researchers interested in engaging in development research across the nine Irish universities are set out in Table 1 below.

Although interrelated, these factors may be separated into individual and institutional

² Makerere University (Uganda), University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique), University of Malawi (Malawi)

factors. The individual factors in both categories are listed first, followed by institutional factors.

Table 1: The opportunities and barriers to development research within Irish universities

Opportunities	Barriers
Personal interest – interested in doing socially relevant research	Limited knowledge / expertise in development
Development as part of either background training or previous work experience	
Personal networks in the development field	
Peer support and mentorship offered within own department (or other) – including international staff	Academic fees for international students
An institutional commitment (departmental) to development – in staffing, research expectations and curricula	Limited institutional support for this type of research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - funding - time and resource intensity - unsuited to existing reward schemes and early academic career pressures – a scarcity of high tier journals and social research not highly valued
Recruitment of international staff and post-doctoral researchers	Funding limited (PRTL/SFI focused on national priorities and Irish Aid funding very short-term)
Networking opportunities through international partnerships	
Dedicated research support departments / managers with interest in development	

At an individual level, one of the key factors contributing to researcher’s involvement in development research (with many bringing these global dimensions and perspectives into their teaching) is a personal interest in the area. This often stems from having studied development as part of an undergraduate or postgraduate programme and/or having worked in this field, often in a developing country. Some researchers also have friends and colleagues who work in development and this helps

sustain their interest and enthusiasm. Contrarily, some researchers, though interested in bringing a greater global dimension to their work, feel that they have limited knowledge and expertise to do so. These are academics who have not benefitted from any formal education or exposure to development and find it difficult to gain a foothold in this area.

These factors at an individual level highlight the importance of institutional factors as providing an enabling (or, in a number of cases, disabling) environment for academics wishing to pursue more activities in development-related fields. Key factors contributing to researcher's involvement in development research include institutional (often departmental) commitments and practices such as the recruitment of international staff, requirements for an international dimension to course curricula, and expectations of research outputs incorporating global dimensions within contracts. In instances where there are growing numbers of staff interested and working on development-related issues, peer support and mentorship are also seen to boost interest and activism in this area. At a more macro-level again, many institutions now have dedicated research support departments which prove extremely helpful in providing administrative support to staff and organising short-term training programmes. Researchers note that, in instances where people within these departments have an interest in development, additional support to researchers in this field may be provided.

These positive factors notwithstanding, there is a strong perception that a range of institutional factors militate against academic involvement in development-related issues. The most commonly cited issue is that of fees for overseas students. While

universities understandably view these high fees (approximately Euro 13,000 for non-EU students) as a valuable source of revenue, academics see them as a barrier to attracting students with first-hand insights and experiences of the developing world. Additionally, the reward and incentive scheme offered to academics seeking to advance their careers within the Irish university system fails to take into account both the resource-intensive nature of development research and the relevance and usefulness of its outputs. Although funding for this type of research is scarce (with the vast bulk of funding in Ireland earmarked for national rather than international development priorities), it is nonetheless time and resource-intensive.

Comprehending and negotiating the complex field of development – whether in a health-related area, an educational area, or in engineering or politics – takes time. Outputs are not immediate, nor do they find a ready home in the high-tier journals on which academic careers depend. With higher education institutions privileging frequent publication in high-ranking journals, there are clearly opportunity costs for academics, in particular young academics, who opt to undertake development-related research and activities.

Drawing these findings together it appears that the main drivers currently behind academic staff becoming involved and engaged in development issues, through their research and on into their teaching, are personal. Individual interest, enthusiasm, commitment and experience are key in determining the extent to which academics feed this dimension into their work. In instances where there is an institutional (often departmental) commitment, supports for this work come from colleagues, managers and mentors. However at a higher institutional level, the combined pressures of time, funding and immediate publications exacted through the reward and incentive scheme

in place in all universities requires staff to make difficult choices. Starkly-put, it seems to be development-related work or career advancement. Clearly, for global perspectives to become more deeply and integrally embedded in our universities, changes will need to be made at institutional levels. In particular there needs to be a coordinated strategy for mainstreaming global perspectives across faculties, departments and schools, as well as ensuring that work in this field attracts rather than repels recognition and reward, recognising its contribution to the development of both an inclusive, democratic society and the education and development of its global citizens. But how can this happen? The findings of a somewhat similar piece of research conducted in the UK which came to some similar conclusions are instructive in this regard.

The Global Perspectives in Higher Education project, commissioned by DfID in 2007, sought to assess how global perspectives are integrated into undergraduate learning and teaching across a variety of disciplines, departments and higher education institutions across the UK. Like the IAP study, it found that *“the extent to which global perspectives are embedded in departmental and institutional practice depends on individual enthusiasm and discretion”* (Lunn, 2008:231) rather than on institutional incentives and supports as such. It also noted, as in the Irish case, that the majority of British institutions studied tend to associate global perspectives almost exclusively with the recruitment of international students (2008: 249). Interestingly, in the context of the IAP study, the UK study includes a scattergram analysis of the key actors necessary for embedding global perspectives into the higher education research and curricula (2008: 250 – Figure 2). Emerging at the high end of both scales (potential influence and current involvement respectively) are, unsurprisingly – as we

have seen, teaching staff. However, emerging as the highest level actor on the potential influence scale, though currently not rating extremely high on the current involvement scale, are the Vice Chancellors. The message here is that if universities are serious about globalising their research and teaching and meeting the needs of an increasingly complex global knowledge economy and society, support is required at the top. Such practical support, percolating down through faculties in the form of strategies and policies aimed at mainstreaming development throughout the system, is a key pre-requisite for contemporising and globalising our higher education system.

Conclusion

While traditionally development has remained somewhat on the margins of our higher education system - relegated to a small number of specialist courses, staff and low-tier journals dealing with issues and problems “over there”, in an increasingly interconnected world “over there” is now here. Development issues have moved centre-stage in the globalised economy and society for which we prepare our graduates. For universities to maintain their relevance in this changing world, they need to put in place strategies and policies which mainstream these issues across all faculties, thereby equipping students (and staff) with the competencies and capacities to comprehend, analyse and critically function in the increasingly interconnected world in which we all now live.

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