

GLOBALISING HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in Ireland, as elsewhere, are facing severe challenges on a number of fronts. On the one hand, increasing enrolment figures coupled with dwindling state support are leaving higher education institutions facing severe financial challenges; on the other, the very idea and fundamental role of higher education is being challenged through the shifting nature of knowledge(s) and the changing needs of an increasingly complex global society.

Within this context, a considerable debate has grown on the impact of globalisation on higher education. One aspect of this debate, played out most recently in the pages of *The Irish Times* (Garvin, 2010; von Prondynski, 2010), is the increasing corporatisation of management structures and practices within higher education institutions. The other inter-related aspect relates to the nature and function of higher education itself in an increasingly complex, globalised world. In this article I focus on the latter. Following developments in higher education over the past four decades, I highlight some fundamental challenges and contradictions in the globalisation of higher education in Ireland. Specifically, I suggest that the combination of a prioritisation of the exigencies of the knowledge economy with the neglect of development and global education within third level leaves students and graduates ill-prepared to mediate, negotiate and challenge the increasingly complex, global society in which they live and work.

Globalising higher education

From the mid-1990s to 2006 the Irish economy underwent a period of very rapid growth with the average growth rate of over 7 per cent per annum, more than double that of the USA and close to triple the average growth rate in the Eurozone (Ryan, et al., 2008). Unemployment fell to 0 per cent with over 600,000 jobs (an increase of 50 per cent on 1994 levels) created between 1994 and 2004. While the causes of this transformation are still the subject of much debate, there is agreement that the key factor driving the country's economic

success was the attraction of almost 1,000 foreign-owned firms. While political stability coupled with a range of favourable tax incentives and a relatively low cost base combined to produce a climate attractive to investment, higher education institutions have also been identified as a key actor promoting the country's successful insertion into the global economy (Fitzgerald, 2000).

The contribution of higher education in this regard took two forms: significant increases in training and skills developments in targeted areas from the 1970s onwards; and targeted funding for research and development beginning in the early 2000s. Since the late 1960s, a major thrust of national economic policy has been to dramatically enhance the country's national technical, technological and innovative skill base through increased public support to a growing number of higher education institutions (White, 2000). In line with trends across the European Union (EU), enrolment and participation rates at higher level increased significantly from the 1970s following targeted policy developments aimed at meeting the changing labour force requirements of a late-industrialising society. 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).

Although this new direction gave rise to considerable debate, most notably about the merits of liberal education versus a more vocational role for higher education (White, 2000:191-193), by the mid-1990s these training versus education debates fell by the wayside as the dramatic upturn in the economy highlighted the need for a range of new skill sets and expertise. The influential strategy document produced in 1996 by Forfás, the policy advisory and coordination board for industrial development, science and technology, emphasised that the main determinant of the competitiveness of the enterprise sector was the skills and knowledge of the workforce. As White notes, 'The [Forfás] report was indicative of how much the education system had become central to the success of the state's industrial policy' (2000:192).

Globalising society

The result of this strategy has been not just a globalisation of the national economy, but also of society more broadly. The rapidly changing face(s) of modern Ireland, at work and at leisure, is now readily apparent to all. 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 (CSO, 2009). 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 multiplied by the extremely high proportion of foreign owned companies in the country, with foreign-owned (and often managed) firms accounting for 50 per cent of all manufacturing employment in Ireland by the early 2000s (O'Riain, 2004).

In this context, fundamental questions arise in relation to how well Irish higher education institutions equip students with capacities to comprehend, negotiate and play active roles within this globalised society. What do Irish students and 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 critically analysing the global context in which the companies in which they work operate? In short, how well do they understand and engage with the interrelated, globalised society in which we all now live?

The findings from two surveys, conducted in 2002 and 2006 respectively, suggest not terribly well. The principal finding of the 2002 survey was the lack of detailed knowledge of global issues among the Irish populace at large (Weafer, 2002). The preferred source of information on global issues for 92 per cent of the 1,000 people surveyed was the media (2002:11). Moreover, over 50 per cent of those surveyed are reported to have found educational institutions unreliable in the information they provide on global issues (2002: 13). Following on from this study, the 2006 survey, carried out among 900 students across all universities in the republic, found 'little evidence of any sophisticated understanding of development issues, or any capacity to rank different explanations of development' (Connolly, Doyle & Dwyer, 2008:226). Analysing the survey findings, the researchers report that, once again, the media (television at 83 per cent of respondents, followed by newspapers at 68 per cent) proves the most popular source of information on global issues, although 50 per cent also cite their educational institutions as important (2008:219). Interestingly, these latter 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 United States where students are again found to have a poor knowledge of contemporary global issues, current affairs, and other people, places and cultures. These findings indicate that the time has come to re-engage in debate on the role and relevance of higher education in this contemporary context. To answer this question we need to interrogate more broadly the role of higher education in society.

What is higher about higher education?: Commonalities with development education

According to one of the leading international scholars on higher education, Ronald Barnett, at the heart of higher education lies the development of students' critical abilities (1995; 2005). Students need to be supported and encouraged in developing faculties to critically mediate, negotiate, and engage with the increasingly complex world in which they live. As Barnett states:

“students on courses of higher education should be encouraged to enter into a continuing conversation, be prepared to take on the point of view of others and become comfortable in conducting that critical dialogue with themselves” (1995:27).

In a later paper dealing specifically with post-modern challenges to the universality of knowledge, Barnett (2005) develops this core dimension of critical thinking more fully. He argues

“in a postmodern world, universals are not at an end. 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).

Barnett advocates that research and teaching within contemporary higher education institutions (in all faculties and departments) take what he terms ‘an ontological turn’ (2005:795). 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 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.

In order to do this, students' knowledge of and engagement with the world necessarily needs to move beyond the traditional parameters of the nation state. As Robertson and Dale argue, a critical approach to contemporary education entails an engagement with the wider challenges posed by contemporary globalised, and globally driven, transformations within the field of education. Specifically they argue for a:

“...need to get beyond framings and analysis of education policymaking that continue to assume education to be a national enterprise taking place within what has historically been called the ‘education sector’” (Robertson & Dale, 2009:24).

This is because, they argue, the persistent appearance of national autonomy serves to conceal the real sources of development, underdevelopment, knowledge and power within globalised society.

Following this, a truly globalised higher education system has much in common with the aims and ethos of development education which also puts critical thinking at its core. While both the concept and practice of development education, as with other forms of education, remain somewhat contested (see Khoo, 2003 for a good overview of different conceptions), there is agreement on the importance of this critical dimension as a precursor to action towards social change. For Irish Aid development education is defined as follows:

“...an educational process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the rapidly changing, interdependent and unequal world in which we live. It seeks to engage people in analysis, reflection and action for local and global citizenship and participation. It is about supporting people in understanding, and in acting to transform the social, cultural, political and economic structures which affect their lives and others at personal, community, national and international levels” (Irish Aid, 2003).

This clearly highlights the commonalities in aims and ethos between the two educational forms. Yet, to date, development education at a formal sectoral level has remained largely focused on primary and secondary-level educational institutions and systems. At this crucial time when the impact of globalisation on higher education (together with society more broadly) is being

challenged, and when the relevance (and associated financial support) of higher education is in question, it is time for development education policymakers and practitioners to come together with higher education authorities with a view to truly globalising higher education, shifting boundaries and borders – both geographic and conceptual – to build synergies and work together to equip students with the competencies and capacities to comprehend, analyse and critically function in the increasingly interconnected world in which we all now live.

Conclusion

The changing faces, challenges and opportunities offered by an increasingly diverse, globalised society require new thinking on the traditional boundaries of development education. Relegating development education within higher level institutions to small numbers of specialist courses, staff and low-tier journals dealing with issues and problems ‘over there’ is no longer a viable option. ‘Over there’ is now here. Having played a critical role in building Ireland’s globalised ‘knowledge economy’, the challenge is now for higher education and development education institutions, agencies and specialists alike to address the other side of the coin, working together to build consolidate globalised ‘knowledge society’ in equal measure.

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