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Book Review

Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective by Patrick Clancy. Institute of Public Administration, 2015

The book 'Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective' will be of interest to a wide range of readers, from higher education (HE) researchers and practitioners looking for specialised knowledge on a variety of topics, to the general public inquiring about the history and current state of higher education in Ireland compared to developments in other countries. The analysis will be especially pertinent to those interested in adult and community education, since the issues of access and equity in HE are explored from many angles. While the author certainly succeeds in his stated objective for the study to be of relevance to policy makers and to stimulate dialogue about possible future options, all readers will appreciate this unique comprehensive analysis of almost every, if not all, aspects of Irish contemporary higher education. Clancy's extensive knowledge and experience in the field at national and international levels allows him to engage the reader with fascinating insider facts on various events that have shaped Irish HE in the recent decades. As a mature doctoral student transferring from USA to Ireland, this is an invaluable resource for me, as I am sure it will be for other scholars.

Organised into thirteen chapters, the first chapter provides an outline for the rest of the book and each consequent chapter covers a distinct area. While each chapter is self-contained there are a number of threads entwined through the different chapter contexts which results in a range of insights about lessons learned and their implications for future public policy. It is particularly interesting to note that one such 'thread' is the attention devoted in various chapters to issues of adult access and learning.

While Chapter 2 examines global trends in enrolments and diversification of HE systems, Chapter 3 explores patterns of participation in a comparative analysis of 28 OECD countries. The study reveals that in 1999, comparative data placed Irish HE students among the youngest in the Western world. Public policy efforts followed to encourage greater participation by 'mature students' resulting in Ireland fitting the modal pattern among the OECD countries by 2011 with 20% of students being over 30 years of age (p.45).

Chapter 4 on inequalities in access to higher education occupies a centrally important place in the book. Drawing on comparative statistics, while significant inequalities remain, Ireland emerges as one of the countries in which some progress has been made. The author, however, warns that this should not lead to complacency as the study is based on highly aggregated data.

Still, according to the 2011 EU study, Ireland appears to be one of the countries with most concrete policy objectives for the participation of adults in HE, focussing on arrangements for admission based on the validation of prior learning (both formal and non-formal), specific preparatory programmes and the extent of part-time study routes (p.81).

Furthermore, in Ireland the provision of part-time courses is now part of a wider trend towards open and distance/flexible learning. The primary motivation in this policy shift stems from an economic and social case aimed at raising levels of education and skills among a wider population.

For many adults, whether they require up-skilling and retraining, wish to change careers, or become unemployed and need to acquire new qualifications (p.299), engaging in further study needs to be combined with work or care responsibilities. MOOCs (massive open online courses) are mentioned as a promising development in HE, and one specific programme aimed at opening a higher education opportunity to people who are unemployed (Springboard) is cited as an important initiative. However, the author makes it clear a more fundamental reorientation of the education system is needed for wider access issues to be addressed.

Chapters 5-6 examine the issues of admission and retention in HE, as well as the curriculum and social conditions, while in Chapter 7 the author moves on to explore the academic profession – a relatively new area of higher education. The first official publication of staffing statistics in Irish HE in 2013 facilitated Ireland's participation in a major comparative survey of the academic profession examined by the author.

The themes of research, labour market, funding, and governance and steering are explored in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 10 on funding discusses the reduction in state support for HE, the increase in student contribution and the negative effect of recession on the availability of part-time employment that students might require while in college. Chapter 12 offers critical analysis of the proposals for the structural reform of the Irish HE system, and a review of the international experience. The author notes the conflicting interests of the stakeholders involved in the restructuring of Irish HE, and warns about the potential 'goal displacement' whereby a disproportionate amount of energy will be invested in the politics of restructuring to the detriment of the academic goals of resulting institutions (p.291). There are also concerns about possible academic and mission drifts.

The concluding Chapter 13 draws the various strands together, highlighting some of the immediate challenges ahead. The structural reform of the Irish HE system and providing for current and future funding demands are among the most pressing challenges facing higher education in Ireland. Others include flexibility of provision, expansion and inclusion, quality issues, steering and policy contestation, and the challenge of sustaining the mission of diversity.

This book is a major contribution to our understanding of higher education in Ireland and its place in the global arena. This comprehensive knowledge and research is made available to readers in a user-friendly form, and one can only wish for a wide dissemination reaching many who will be inspired to continue making a difference in access and quality in higher education.

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