

## **The Hunt Report and Higher Education Policy: 'An Irish solution to an Irish problem?'**

### **Introduction**

The optimistically entitled 'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030', launched in January 2011, represents the latest and most assertive attempt by the Irish state to re-construct HE. The report, far from being a radical new plan for HE, is one of many in a long line of official reports and governmental initiatives, which argue for systemic and cultural change. But more importantly, we argue that HE is being re-positioned as a 'cure and restorative' for economic failures and structural deficiencies manifest during and after the 'Celtic Tiger' era (1995-2007). As a narrative, this occupies a powerful and explicit position in the Hunt Report. However, within the context of this document, the authors' 'education as panacea' motif is constructed around many of the conceptual and rhetorical resources of neo-liberalism, assertive managerialism and the 'knowledge economy', with a distinctive focus on the realisation of economic gains to be made through HE. Many of the themes in the report reflect wider international trends and influences, mediated both through the OECD and European institutions. These include rationalisation to overcome academic and administrative duplication; the student as 'consumer'; internationalisation in relation to global competition for students, staff and resources; 'reform' of college governance to enforce accountability and compliance with state policies; commitment to expanding participation, particularly widening access for under-represented groups, which is driven as much by economic imperatives as concerns with equity. The 'knowledge economy' agenda co-exists with remnants of an earlier 'partnership' approach, a key theme of policy and process during the Celtic Tiger.

The first part of the paper will set out key structural features of the Irish system, providing a context to discuss the potential implications of the Hunt Report. The second part explores the implications of the report, considering how its major themes reflect long-term policy trends within the Irish HE system, which are themselves shaped by international and domestic priorities.

## **Structures & Systems**

The Irish higher education system has undergone a significant transformation over the past three decades, in part accelerated by 15 years of rapid economic growth. Current negative economic dynamics notwithstanding, these changes are in line with well-documented international trends (Skilbeck, 2001; OECD, 2006, 2008, 2010; Dale and Robertson, 2009; Limond, 2005; Marginson, 2009). This shift can be categorised around three main policy themes: expansion and diversification of the student body; knowledge generation through increased levels of research activity, and knowledge transfer via either entrepreneurial activities or professional and/or vocational education and 'upskilling'. In quantifying this expansion, in 1965 there were 18,127 full-time undergraduate students located in five institutions, which increased to 153,329 in 2009-10, distributed across 26 institutions including seven Universities and thirteen Institutes of Technology (HEA, 2012). There were also 35,220 registered postgraduate students for 2009-10, with 8,419 (23.9%) undertaking doctoral studies and 17,498 (49.6%) on masters (taught or research) programmes. In terms of financing the system, the proportion of GDP spent on HE has been just below the OECD average of 1.36% for the past 16 years at about 1.33% (OECD, 2010).

In relation to 'knowledge generation' there has been a shift in the volume, type and quality of research. From a very low base 15 years ago, the Irish state initiated a fivefold increase in public investment to develop this strand of HE, leading to an increase in the proportion of GDP devoted to research and development (GERD) from 1.26% in 1995 to 1.79% in 2009 (OECD, 2004, 2010). Moreover, new state agencies dedicated to developing research, notably Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Councils, became significant forces in the funding and organisation of higher education within a short period of time. This policy shift has not only given the status of research in HE greater strategic importance, but also generated a number of debates around the kind of research undertaken (in particular the dominance of science and technology); the legitimating and valorisation of certain kinds of knowledge; the question of where different types of research should be undertaken; the place of 'academic capitalism' and the potential to 'downgrade' teaching and scholarship as core academic activities.

Although the changes within the Irish system have been less dramatic than in the UK or Australia, due to the dampening effect of the Irish social partnership model (essentially a compact between unions, employers and the state), they have, nonetheless, followed a similar script on the supposed benefits of managerialism and quasi-markets as opposed to the allegedly sub-optimal, traditional work practices based on high-trust and autonomy in a framework of light regulation.

### **Implications of the Hunt report**

It has been unsurprising that the Irish government elected in 2011, constrained by an economic crisis and unwelcome dependence on an international-European bailout programme, perceived the Hunt report as a potential base camp for a far-reaching rationalisation of HE. Since the launch of the report in January 2011, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has launched a series of policy initiatives which elaborate on key themes of the strategy and give a flavour of its potential long-term implications.

- The new government proclaimed a 'strategic dialogue' between the Irish state and HE institutions in May 2011 on the implementation of the national strategy. A key issue to be explored is the extent to which the emphasis on 'strategic dialogue' is a genuine policy commitment to consultation and engagement between the state and HE institutions, or a veneer for a heavy-handed process of rationalisation.
- In line with the report's emphasis on institutional rationalisation a HEA document in late 2011 called for the establishment of 'regional collaborative clusters'. The HEA envisaged 'clusters' as groups of institutions operating as 'collaborative partners' to deliver on jointly agreed strategic objectives, either in a particular region or in pursuit of a well defined mission. The initiative proposed significant rationalisation, including sharing of staff and support services, co-ordination to eliminate duplication in academic programmes and creation of centres of excellence to achieve 'critical mass' in particular disciplines.

- A more far-reaching initiative for restructuring emerged in February 2012, with the HEA paper 'Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape'. Echoing the Hunt report's endorsement of a 'small number of larger institutions', the HEA sought the adoption of a 'system-level approach' to promote a range of institutional types – universities, technological universities and traditional Institutes of Technology – with differentiated missions. The initiative offered a vision of 'directed diversity', involving sectoral co-ordination and institutional restructuring to ensure that each institution '...by playing to its strengths...can make the biggest impact both for itself and for Irish society' (HEA, 2012).

In summary, government initiatives since the publication of the Hunt report present a vision of managed competition, in which reformed institutions, differentiated by mission, collaborate closely together or engage in competition for state funding in targeted research areas. There is a strong sense that institutions should subordinate their distinctive identity and interests to official objectives and a wider commitment to national economic salvation in an era of unprecedented crisis.

## **Conclusion**

The Hunt report is firmly located within a 'knowledge economy' paradigm and sets out a vision for managerial 'reform' and rationalisation of the Irish HE system. It is consistent to this extent with wider international developments and appears to fall within the broad spectrum of managerialism as identified in the international literature. Yet there is a distinctively Irish dimension to the Hunt report. A key theme of the report is an uncompromising assertion of the authority of the Irish state. The direction of policy in the report is firmly interventionist, aiming to secure a far-reaching restructuring of the HE sector delivered largely by state intervention. This commitment to state intervention reflects the dominant role played by the Irish state in the reform and expansion of higher education since the 1960s.

While plans for rationalisation are presented as beneficial to HE institutions and students, the policy is driven by economic imperatives and particularly the economic priorities of a state in crisis. The Irish state has given a central place to education in economic revival, competitiveness and ultimately national survival since the

publication of the *Investment in Education* study in 1965 (Government of Ireland, 1965). Higher education has occupied a similarly vital place in the calculations of national policy-makers since the 1980s, exemplified by the commitment to rapid expansion of student participation and radical upgrading of research infrastructure. The closely intertwined themes of the Hunt report – increased state intervention to serve ‘knowledge economy’ objectives – reflect dominant policy trends in Irish Higher Education for at least a generation.