

The trajectory of Republic of Ireland higher education system. Past and forward-looking policies. (0170)

Giulio Marini

Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy, Centre for Global Higher Education, University College London ~ Institute of Education

Albeit getting independence from UK in 1921, the Irish higher education system dates back since the XVI century, when the Tudor dynasty was at least able to establish a stable university in Dublin: the “Holy and Undivided Trinity of Queen Elizabeth”, usually called the “Trinity College”. The political and religious dimensions had remained intertwined in the island of Ireland for many centuries, with serious attempts made by the Catholic Irish to establish an University of their own during the second half of the XIX century (Coolahan 1981; White 2001). Just in this historical and geographical context, John Henry Newman formulated his famous *Idea of an University* (Newman 1905): an attempt to justify the tie between the Catholic religion and the economic and political context through the unleashing of science for the sake of human endeavors (Collini 2012). In 1908 the UK Parliament in London passed the “Irish University Act”, giving birth to new universities in Cork and Galway.

In the 60s the system witnessed a “silent revolution” in higher education (Coolahan 1981). In 1971 the *Higher Education Authority* (HEA, *An tÚdarás* in Irish) was established. The model was that of the agency under the rule and the accountability toward the Department of Skills and the Parliament. In Analogy with the British higher education system, the establishment Authority is the first step toward the building of a State driven system via new declination of the concept of institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Clancy, 1989).

In later decades (70s, 80s, mid 90s) Ireland struggles to exit ultimately from a underdevelopment condition (Kelleghan 1989; White 2001). The funding system was substantially on historical base and the HEA was usually keen and benign in awarding further funding when required on the basis of the general assumption of the increasing costs of research (O’Buachalla 1992).

In mid 90s the Irish system made a significant reform in the field of higher education. The “University Act” passed in 1997 in fact was aimed to style itself as a system with more independent universities. The number of Irish institutions increased by the erections of institutes or other colleges to the status of universities by *charter*, such in the case of University of Limerick, previously the “Institute of Higher Education”. The National University is reformed to create a sort of umbrella constituency in the Country and giving more emphasis on the national system instead of single universities as it had been in the previous decades. This Act changes the way institutions are accountable to the Authority in relation to funding issues, shaping substantially the internal governance. *Governing Authorities* (they might be called differently according to each institution) at institutional level are the accountant bodies for the Principal and other personnel who are chairing and serving as managers in institutions. By enforcing this sort of “provost” body, the Act aims at tightening the strategy of institutions and tying it up with national strategy devised by the political power and transmitted by the HEA as a buffer body. Quality Assurance is also established, which is evaluated by the HEA via international visits.

In the same period (mid 90s) there was the political necessity to abolish the fees making the enrolment to Irish tertiary education completely free of charge (Clancy, Goastellec 2007). This choice attempted to shoot up the number of youth with tertiary education in coherence with the upcoming European credo of the “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. However, weaker labour markets for young people may have had a positive impact on higher education participation, along with gratuity (Flannery, O'Donoghue 2009), apart from some net more equity in participation in higher education by social class and gender (McCooy, Smyth 2011; Smyth 2009). The higher education system was since this period politically committed to be designed to help the specific Irish development, especially in the field of services (Killeavy 2004).

In 1999 and along the first year of 2000s the Irish higher education system pushes forward the unification of the system under a unique central steer at the distance tool by unifying the evaluation agencies of the binary system. The QA agency is founded in 1999 and is accountable to the HEA. In 2001 the *Teaching Council Act* establishes the Council to register the teachers at national level. The Council is hence delegated to assess the up-to-date qualification of its own set of professionals in order to guarantee a proper qualification in all sections of the education, from primary to tertiary education via certain educational institutions within the tertiary education according to the model of the “national education universities” that are usually separated from the rest of the faculties and are used as formation of the civil servants.

In 2006 an Agency entitled to manage the “Further Education” system is repealed and all functions are transmitted to HEA (Institutes of Technology Act). Since this moment, and in coherence with other changes already occurred in previous years, the HEA becomes the only intermediary between the State (Department of Education and Skills) and all the institutions of the tertiary education system. This Act also gives the substantial responsibilities and accountability framework that the 1997 Act gave to the Universities. The reduction of leeway for the IoTs is to this regard underlined in the public debate (Coate, MacLabhrainn, 2009). This Act denotes the end of the expansion of the tertiary vocational system in Ireland. Directors and Presidents are entitled with executive roles in IoTs in the same structure of the secondary schools and universities.

In the funding system there is a substantial change since the 50s. A formula funding has been introduced progressively since 2006 in order to rationalize the core public funding to both systems (universities and institutes of technology). The ratio of this choice was to weight the public core funding – around two thirds of the income of tertiary institutions, formally including the fees, but substantially hiding them as “private funding” in Ireland are fees called in a different denomination – on the real number of student enrolled. The criterion of the funding shifted from historical series toward standard costs based on the assumption that four different sort of studies have substantial different costs (i.e. a student in medicine requires a higher funding than one in the humanities). The funding is processed by the HEA. It is interesting to compare this shifting point with the previous one. The debate about formula funding was present since the 80s, when the system of the uniformity in budget was finally replaced by a unit cost at programme/course level in 1992/1993, whereas the previous entailed a unity cost based on full-time student enrolled (O'Buachalla 1992). The basics of funding in the early 90s were substantially the same: 65% from State core grants; 30% from fees (few years later abolished) and a 5% from institutional earnings. Yet, the increasing cost of “fees” reached the 3000€ per year per students, which is less around a fourth of the English fees (9000€) but slightly above the average of European Countries.

In general, this second step does not only entails the IoTs, but it empowers further the HEA. The change of functions is not visible from any change of the HEA, both in acronym or general remit. The new rules and practices commencing the second half of 2000s set a crucial date in the shape from an agency governing each institutions of the Republic into a more centralized system aimed to have an international perspective and a centralized strategy (the national strategy is published in 2011) (Hazelkorn 2014) in a context of economic deflation (Oriain 2014). In fact, the national strategy and policy development are the main issues of the change of the new Department. In 2011 a new system to reduce costs in public agencies, pursuant the “Troika” too and plans to meet public financial sustainability, enters into force. Human resources are touched both in recruitment and promotions following a general criterion of ceiling and contraction of “core-funding” permanent positions. These constrains paved the way to an Irish version of the contraposition against neo-liberalism and managerialism in academia (Lynch, Grummell, [Devine](#) 2012).

A third final watershed is probably soon to come as the recent publications about the strategy for Ireland until 2030, the work of group of experts, all herald possible new substantial changes in funding mechanism (i.e. a new “compact” format). This change falls beyond the current date.

References

- Adshead M., Wall O. (2003) Policy transfer and the Irish university sector. In Asshead M., Millar M. (Eds.) *Public Administration and Public Policy in Ireland: Theory and Methods*. Routledge, London
- Clancy, P. (1989). “The Evolution of Policy in Third-Level Education.” In *Irish Educational Policy: Process and Substance*, edited by D.G. Mulcahy and D. O’Sullivan. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 99–132
- Clancy P., Goastellec G. (2007). [Exploring access and equity in higher education: Policy and performance in a comparative perspective](#), *Higher Education Quarterly* 61(2), 136-154.
- 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.
- Collini S. (2012) *What are universities for?* London, Penguin.
- Coolahan J. (1981). [Irish education. Its history and structure](#).
- [Flannery, D., O’Donoghue C. \(2009\). The determinants of higher education participation in Ireland: A micro analysis](#), *The Economic and Social Review*
- Hazelkorn, E (2014) Rebooting Irish Higher Education: Policy Challenges for Challenging Times, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1343-1354
- Lydon, J. (1991). “The Silent Sister: Trinity College and Catholic Ireland.” In *Trinity College Dublin and the Idea of a University*, edited by C.H. Holland. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin Press, 29–53.
- Lynch K., Grummell B., [Devine](#) D. (2012) [New Managerialism as a Political Project: The Irish Case](#). *New Managerialism in Education*.
- Kelleghan, T. (1989). “The Interface of Research, Evaluation, and Policy in Irish Education.” In *Irish Educational Policy. Process and Substance*, edited by D.G. Mulcahy and D. O’Sullivan, 191–218. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Killeavy M. (2004) Practice and procedures regarding accreditation and evaluation in the Irish republic. In Schwarz S., Westerheijden D.F. (Eds.) *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area*, pp. 233-250.

- McCoy S., Smyth E. (2011). [Higher education expansion and differentiation in the Republic of Ireland](#), *Higher Education*. 61(3): 243-260.
- Newman J.H. (1905) *An Idea of University. Defined and illustrated in nine discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin [and] in occasional lectures and essays addressed to the members of the Catholic University*. London, Longmans Green.
- O'Buachalla, S. (1992) Self-Regulation and the Emergence of the Evaluative State: Trends in Irish Higher Education Policy, 1987-1992. *European Journal of Education*, 27(1/2), 69-78
- O'Sullivan D. (2005) *Cultural politics and Irish education since the 1950s. Policy paradigms and power*. Dublin, Institute of Public Administration.
- Oriain, S. (2014). [The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger : Liberalism, Boom and Bust](#). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press 2014
- Smyth E. (2009). [Buying your way into college? Private tuition and the transition to higher education in Ireland](#), *Oxford Review of Education*.
- Walsh J. (2009) *The politics of expansion. The transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957-72*. Manchester University Press.
- White, T. (2001). *Investing in People. Higher Education in Ireland from 1960–2000*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.