

# Higher Education in Ireland, 1922–2016

John Walsh

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Politics, Policy and Power—A History  
of Higher Education in the Irish State

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October 2018

John Walsh

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# Introduction

The scope of higher education is subject to conflicting interpretations and change over time. Higher level courses at degree and postgraduate level were almost exclusively the preserve of the universities in the early twentieth century. Primary teacher education in Ireland was envisaged as a post second level endeavour from the 1920s, but not explicitly linked to university qualifications until forty years later. Technical schools operated by Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in Dublin and Cork would not typically have been considered higher level institutions in the early 1900s, but several developed into colleges of technology within a reconfigured non-university sector from the 1960s. Post-compulsory further education and training was originally associated with the second-level sector and developed as a distinct sector in its own right only in the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> This study explores the emergence of the modern higher education system in the Irish state, tracing its origins from a fragmented tertiary space including traditional universities, teacher training colleges and technical schools in the early twentieth century to the complex, massified and diverse system of the twenty first century.

Burton Clark in a seminal analysis of forces of coordination in higher education, identified the state, academic oligarchy and the market as the three main elements within a 'triangle of coordination', which he envisaged as a continuum shaped by different forms of integration and influence within distinct national systems.<sup>2</sup> Clark's triangular model identified the dominant forms of integration in North America and Europe based on a cross-national comparison in the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Yet this analysis risks understating other 'forces of coordination', often rooted in international organisation or ideology. As Marginson and Rhoades point out, the Catholic Church was 'a powerful example of global influence on the structural and ideological underpinnings of higher education.'<sup>4</sup> This applies with particular force to Ireland, where the rejection of neutral or 'godless' university colleges in the mid to late 1800s was a key inflection point in the triumph of ultramontane Catholicism. Higher education in Ireland evolved in a distinctive political and cultural context shaped by conflicting religious and national allegiances.

Hazelkorn et al suggest that Irish higher education remained 'essentially a self-referential system' in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> While this captures the persistence of established structures, institutions and practices up to the late 1900s, it understates the power of international forces and ideologies over a wider historical timeframe. Conceptualisations of the university and higher education in Ireland were shaped by ideologies with an international reach, including ultramontane Catholicism, postwar social and Christian democracy and theories of human capital formation rooted in liberal economics. Cultural and political nationalism also framed the context in which higher education institutions functioned in the early to mid-twentieth century. More recently, the emergence of globalisation has exerted a profound influence on higher education systems in the developed world, contributing to a re-appraisal of policy, curriculum frameworks and institutional structures in Ireland. As Vaira notes, powerful supranational agencies such as the Organisation for Co-operation and Development in Europe (OECD) serve as 'institutional carriers' which promote and disseminate 'the wider rationalised myths' of globalisation, establish the legitimacy of

policies and institutional behaviours and define the context in which HEIs (and national systems) operate in the contemporary world.<sup>6</sup>

The interface between the state, academic institutions and other key institutional actors, including the churches, Irish language organisations, employers and trade unions, is the major focus of the study. Exploring the interplay between HEIs, domestic political, religious and business elites and supranational organisations such as the OECD and European Union, is essential to understanding the evolution of the modern Irish HE system. The study's focus on the influence of ideology and the role of supranational organisations in mediating dominant discourses is also intended to avoid the perils of 'methodological nationalism'<sup>7</sup> and the familiar trap of using Britain (or England) as the chief reference point.

There is no detailed academic study of higher education (HE) in the modern Irish state from a historical perspective. As White noted in 2001, while research on education has greatly expanded over the past generation, the history of higher education has attracted relatively little scholarly analysis, particularly in comparison with other developed countries.<sup>8</sup> Many of the texts on the history of Irish education, including Ó Buachalla (1988) and Mulcahy and O'Sullivan (1989) date from the 1980s and their access to state papers on education was restricted by the thirty-year rule.<sup>9</sup> John Coolahan's excellent (and recently updated) survey of the history and contemporary structure of education in Ireland has a broad focus encompassing primary, second level and higher education from 1800 to the present day.<sup>10</sup> Clancy (1989) and Ó Buachalla (1992) explore the massification and diversification of Irish higher education between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Tony White's work considered the transformation of the higher education system between 1960 and 2000, informed mainly by official publications and other published literature. Denis O'Sullivan (2005) explored the cultural politics underpinning Irish education as a whole, seeking to locate the transformation of the educational sector within a theoretical framework.<sup>12</sup> More recently, the historical development and current direction of teacher education in independent Ireland is explored by O'Donoghue, Harford and O'Doherty, in a detailed exposition informed by a range of secondary sources, while Richard Thorn has

published a study on the evolution of the Regional Technical Colleges from their foundation to the contemporary period.<sup>13</sup>

While higher education in Ireland attracted relatively little historical analysis until the early 2000s, there is an increasingly extensive literature on contemporary higher education policy. Patrick Clancy's detailed analysis of Irish higher education is the most recent major work in the field, considering the contemporary higher education system in a comparative context.<sup>14</sup> Access and participation at higher level have been the subject of in-depth scholarly exploration since the 1970s (including successive HEA studies led by Clancy, a number of studies commissioned by the ESRI and most recently an edited volume by Loxley, Fleming and Finnegan) and this book has benefited greatly from their detailed engagement with the subject.<sup>15</sup> Loxley et al also presented a detailed overview of policy and curriculum developments linked to various thematic areas, while O'Connor undertook an in-depth analysis of gender in higher education management.<sup>16</sup> I have tried to avoid replicating the work or analysis of others, while drawing upon the growing body of literature in the field of higher education.

The book is informed principally by archival sources (particularly the departmental papers in the National Archives), many of which were not previously available or were not exploited for a study of higher education. The research also draws upon official publications, parliamentary debates and national newspapers. I have used extensively the reports of the Public Accounts Committee, which contain a wealth of data on education, particularly for the earlier chapters of the book. The records of the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin proved invaluable, particularly the voluminous McQuaid papers, in deciphering the close relationship between the bishops, their academic allies and public officials up to the 1970s. The book draws on a range of institutional records, including the minutes and correspondence files of the senate of the National University of Ireland and minutes and correspondence of the Board of TCD. Although the study is based principally on documentary research, I have also conducted a number of interviews, which were useful in understanding contemporary developments where government papers or other archival records are not yet available.<sup>17</sup>

The focus of the book is the history of higher education in independent Ireland from the creation of the Irish Free State until the end of the economic crisis triggered by the 'Great Recession'. As this study has a historical focus, it does not set out to offer a comprehensive exploration of academic practice, pedagogy or culture in contemporary higher education.<sup>18</sup> Higher education in Northern Ireland is outside the scope of this book, as it forms a distinctive educational sector requiring examination in its own right, shaped by the policies of the British state, the regional priorities of the Stormont administration (1922–72) and the community division in Northern Ireland. While further education as a whole is not the main focus of this work, important aspects of FE, including the development of a national framework for apprenticeship and the emergence of post Leaving Certificate courses, are closely inter-related with the history of higher education.

The study is structured primarily in a chronological format, including a brief analysis of the historical context in the early twentieth century; the ideological underpinnings of Irish universities; the emergence of the Irish Universities Act, 1908 and the position of women in higher education. The earlier Chapters (2–5) reflect on the university-dominated sector up to the 1950s, the under-researched sphere of higher technical education and the close alliance between the state and the major churches in the training of primary teachers. Chapters 7–8 present an in-depth analysis of the transformation of the higher educational sector through diversification, expansion and massification in the second half of the twentieth century. The final chapter takes a more explicitly thematic approach to contemporary policy developments in the early 2000s, exploring internationalisation, teaching and learning, research, the rise of managerialism, access, gender, private higher education, financial sustainability and the impact of economic crisis. The closing discussion of the Hunt Report and ensuing contemporary initiatives gives an introduction informed by a historical perspective to an ongoing and still fluid process of policy and structural change.

The book considers how the exercise of power at local, national and international level impinged on the mission, purpose and values of higher education and on the creation and expansion of a distinctive higher education system. The transformation in public and political

understandings of the role of higher education is considered, charting the gradual and sometimes tortuous evolution from traditionalist conceptions of the academy as a repository for cultural and religious value formation to the re-positioning of higher education as a vital factor in the knowledge based economy. This study explores policy, structural and institutional change in Irish higher education, suggesting that the emergence of the modern higher education system in Ireland was profoundly influenced by ideologies and trends which owed much to a wider European and international context.

## Notes

1. FE has recently begun to attract more scholarly analysis, notably by Rory O’Sullivan, “From ‘Cinderella’ to the ‘Fourth Pillar’ of the Irish Education System—A Critical Analysis of the Evolution of Further Education and Training in Ireland” (Ph.D. diss., TCD, 2018).
2. Burton Clark, *The Higher Education System Academic Organisation in Cross-National Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 142–3.
3. *Ibid.*, 143–5.
4. Simon Marginson and Gary Rhoades, ‘Beyond Nation States, Markets and Systems of Higher Education: A Glonacal Agency Heuristic,’ *Higher Education* 43 (2002): 288.
5. Ellen Hazelkorn, Andrew Gibson, and Siobhán Harkin, ‘From Massification to Globalisation: Reflections on the Transformation of Irish Higher Education,’ in *The State in Transition: Essays in Honour of John Horgan*, ed. Kevin Rafter and Mark O’Brien (Dublin: New Island, 2015), 256.
6. Massimiliano Vaira, ‘Globalisation and Higher Education: A Framework for Analysis,’ *Higher Education* 48 (2004): 488.
7. Clancy, *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective* (Dublin: IPA, 2015), 2.
8. Tony White, *Investing in People: Higher Education in Ireland from 1960 to 2000* (Dublin: IPA, 2001), vii.
9. Séamus Ó Buachalla, *Education Policy in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1988).
10. John Coolahan, *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning A History of Irish Education, 1800-2016* (Dublin: IPA, 2017).

11. Patrick Clancy, 'The Evolution of Policy in Third-Level Education,' in *Irish Educational Policy: Process and Substance*, ed. D. G. Mulcahy and Denis O'Sullivan (Dublin: IPA, 1989), 99–132; Séamus Ó Buachalla, 'Self-Regulation and the Emergence of the Evaluative State: Trends in Irish Higher Education Policy, 1987–92', *European Journal of Education* 27, no.1/2 (1992): 69–78.
12. Denis O'Sullivan, *Cultural Politics and Irish Education Since the 1950s: Policy, Paradigms and Power* (Dublin: IPA, 2005).
13. Tom O'Donoghue, Judith Harford, and Teresa O'Doherty, *Teacher Preparation in Ireland: History, Policy and Future Directions* (Emerald: 2017); Richard Thorn, *No Artificial Limits: Ireland's Regional Technical Colleges* (Dublin: IPA, 2018)—Richard Thorn's valuable study was published after the submission of the current study so the author did not have the opportunity to consult it in detail.
14. Patrick Clancy, *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective* (Dublin: IPA, 2015).
15. Patrick Clancy, *Who Goes to College? A Second National Survey of Participation in Higher Education* (Dublin: HEA, 1988); Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley, and Fergal Finnegan, *Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education* (London: Palgrave, 2017).
16. Andrew Loxley, Aidan Seery, and John Walsh, *Higher Education in Ireland: Practices, Policies and Possibilities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
17. The interviews fall into two distinct categories. A number of interviews were conducted with recent participants in the policy-making process who discussed their recollections on the basis of anonymity and confidentiality. These interviews have been anonymised and these interviewees are identified only by pseudonym (Interviewee A): The data has been kept confidential and is being used only for the purpose of this study. Interviews were also conducted with former policy-makers and academics, where anonymity could not be guaranteed or was not sought by interviewees. All interviews were conducted in line with the approval given to this project by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.
18. For such analysis, see Andrew Loxley, Aidan Seery, and John Walsh, *Higher Education in Ireland: Practices, Policies and Possibilities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Coolahan, *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning*; O'Donoghue, Harford, and O'Doherty, *Teacher Preparation in Ireland: History, Policy and Future Directions*, on teacher education.