

# Higher Education in Ireland

## Taking a different path

Each year, Irish media and academia eagerly await the publication of world university rankings. Columnists laud the few – if indeed any – institution that inched higher, and disparage those who suffered decline. Higher education officials cry once more that Ireland's overall sinking trend is a result of continued underfunding from Government. Economic commentators tell us that Ireland's economic competitiveness is being compromised.

Too much is made of these rankings. They grade a traditional education model that is facing a technological revolution and is in decline. In this rapidly changing industry, aspiring to compete with the dying makes little sense. The world of learning is changing radically and these dated institutional comparisons are both wasteful and dangerous.

Huge amounts of knowledge and information are now provided for free online. Free courses are available to study on every conceivable subject at every level, and what is not already available can and will easily and speedily be published and disseminated in the years ahead. Whatever you want to learn, or teach, you can now make it happen online. However hard-wired the views of the higher educational establishment may be, it is a simple fact that at nearly every level it faces the prospect of disintermediation out of an exciting new world of learning.

Our current higher education systems are not fit for purpose. They teach too few, impart too little knowledge too slowly, and do so at an untenably high cost. Globally, young people are laden down with college debt, which cripples them for much of their early adult lives. Often the debt is incurred for courses and qualifications that do not enhance their personal competitiveness in the job marketplace. How many of us know someone who has an expensive traditional master's degree and is working long-term in a café or similar? This represents a wasted personal education experience and misdirected state resources.

Why is government policy not taking advantage of the revolutionary change in education? A part answer is that Government is asking the wrong people



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**P**repare to be shocked by this bold attack on higher education systems. Get online is the mandate and if you retain fond memories of your own 'campus experience' you may worry now lest that opportunity will have disappeared for your children. The author promises a disruptive revolution within higher education in Ireland and proffers his own funding solution. Could any of this make sense?

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for strategic input on how the industry is unfolding. To understand the future, policy makers must take on board the views of innovators who are doing things differently, yet providing newly competitive solutions to the market. A favourite example is the transport industry in the United States, which moved between 1900 and 1920 from 95% horse and car driven, to 95% motorised. If you asked the “Horse and Car” people how they thought the industry would develop in 1900, or even in 1905, how many would speak about the potential of motorisation? Remarkably, not one large provider of the old mode of transport made it successfully into the new industry. Yet, the Horse and Car people talked of innovation in their day, much as University and College leaders do today.

Despite compelling economic rationale for wholesale changes in higher education, the sector is extraordinarily resistant to change. Across the world, there are two consistently recognisable factors at play. Firstly, education has traditionally been highly political, as knowledge is power, and control of education has always been seen as a conduit to that power. Secondly, educational systems have largely been national systems.

The Internet is dismantling this old structure. National politics no longer has a stranglehold on what people can or cannot learn. People who wish to learn can do so more and more online, using resources that are international rather than national. With 6.1 billion people expected to have access to smartphone devices by 2020 (Ericsson 2016), any learning that can be made available online for free will be made available online. Experts on any subject are now more likely to be found working in industry than in academia. What is different is that all these experts can now publish and teach what they know online. Experts now have the tools to publish directly for anyone who wishes to learn. Some may be restricted within commercial boundaries, but society only needs one expert on a given topic to publish his knowledge or skill for free online and it becomes the gift of everyone.

With this explosion of free learning and course publishing, and the increasing pace of publication and subject knowledge development, the idea that a national higher education system will continue to dominate higher educational learning across its local geographical domain makes no sense. Local universities will be junior partners in providing for the advanced educational needs of local workers in modern economies. If it was possible a century ago in the United States to transform the entire transport industry over a 20-year period, how much more quickly can education be transformed today?

Disruptive technological change is becoming ever more constant. When television arrived in Ireland in the early 1960’s, the Irish government met its responsibility to develop a basic national TV broadcast service. However, there is much greater choice and further competition in the industry today, and few suggest that the Irish Government’s role is to engage in this industry at every level as it once did. In a similar way, the mandate for government to be the financial underwriter of all activity within the higher education industry, especially beyond specific strategic areas, when so many alternative and accessible high quality services are developing worldwide, is a less and less compelling argument.

A disruptive revolution of access, choice and cost is now arriving within Irish higher education. The continuing dominant format of teaching at Irish Universities and Colleges alone screams out impending change. Large classes are still very common, and resources which can easily be accessed outside of a paid educational environment remain core elements of the learning product. Students continue to enjoy minimal one-to-one contact with even junior lecturers and are entitled to next to no time with faculty professors. Courses are habitually out-of-date, not least in economically important sectors such as the sciences.

The French statesman Charles De Gaulle famously remarked that “One must always fight with the inevitable”. In the same way, Irish government policy makers must embrace the future. Firstly, Irish higher level institutions should be instructed to immediately develop free courses online for all its lower level teaching. If these institutions are not providing their basic teaching online for free, then someone else will. Therefore, lead rather than follow. Funding should be withdrawn from colleges and universities for teaching in a wholly traditional manner, forcing them to charge or receive subsidies only for services they can uniquely provide and where they provide unique value. Indeed, the positive international development impact of doing this could greatly outsize the impact of Ireland’s foreign aid budget – an enthralling subject for discussion another time.

Disruptive as this may be to traditional education systems, there are many great benefits to having broad free access to quality higher education online. It allows, for instance, students of any and all ages to assess for themselves whether or not they truly have an interest in the subject area they have chosen to study, before they commit too much. In Ireland, our student attrition statistics are reaching appalling new highs. Students are strongly encouraged across society to go to college, often choosing to study courses for which they are unsuited and from which they quickly drop out. This is a huge cost on the state, on the families that support them, and on the mental state of the students who are burdened, if only in the short term, with a sense of failure. All students should be compelled to complete free online courses on their “chosen” subjects before they attend any state sponsored institution. Remember, because the content is digital, the marginal cost of sharing with extra learners is essentially zero.

Some traditional educationalists might offer the view that public free courses cannot be of the same quality as courses taught within their educational institutions. That, in most cases, is simply not true, especially at the lower levels of higher education. There are ways to ensure very high quality. Consider the two hugely successful internet businesses that have profoundly disrupted their industries – UBER and AirBnB.

New advances in information technology now allow industrial-sized spare capacity within industries to be utilized. Cars were sitting on driveways, and bright sparks realised that they could be used to facilitate transport needs as taxis. Similarly, households across the world have had spare accommodation capacity which they can now offer to the hospitality market at an attractive price. Similarly, why restrict teaching to academics and higher institutions when so many others who know more can teach much more efficiently?

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Consider what happens when either a driver or passenger on UBER, or a tenant or guest on AirBnB, misbehaves: they quickly get sanctioned and black-listed. This process of using the “power of the crowd” to maintain quality control is also enabling across education. Within higher education online, the “power of the crowd” can preserve and enhance quality. What will continue to be offered and retained by the universities and colleges are services that are locally based, i.e. the provision of laboratory facilities or one-to-one access to experts, or the teaching of a small number of subjects that do not lend themselves so well to online learning. Often, these services which higher educational institutions uniquely provide are mispriced (most often underpriced!) and beg a review of their funding/business model.

Irish higher education providers are attempting to diversify. Note how the turnover of accommodation services at some Irish Higher Education institutions now matches or exceeds R&D turnover. These institutions, whether they realise it or not, are entering more and more the educational tourism business, seeking customers from abroad who are coming to Ireland less and less for education and more for social experience and personal development.

In anticipation of a world where higher education becomes less and less the responsibility of national government, and traditional institutions decline in relative importance as players in higher education, there are three steps the Irish government should consider:

Firstly, it is important that the digital skills of every member of Irish society are developed. A comprehensive national digital skills programme where every member of the population is incentivised to learn new online skills, particularly via mobile devices which have become the internet access platform of choice, should be introduced.

Secondly, the government must begin a nationwide lifelong online learning campaign. If someone learns online once, they will learn twice. From helping with problems of social isolation and integration, to raising the productivity of the nation, everyone benefits. The biggest challenge is to get people learning online in the first instance. Once they achieve any level of learning success online, they are often hooked for life so a premium should be considered to encourage this.

Finally, as a nation, we need to start treating the international university rankings systems with the limited and measured respect they deserve. Times are changing in higher education and the old systems are already in decay. We are a small nation, but we are highly creative and capable of charting our own best course. We need to embrace in full the powerful possibilities of free online education, and call out those who want only the grossly inefficient, self-serving status quo to remain.

By rapidly changing the focus of our higher education system to online, our national higher education sector of new and old actors could expand to become a world leader, incomparable with legacy institutions worldwide. If we take on this challenge, we will empower our people like never before. And that will set us uniquely ahead and apart.