

A New Era for Higher Education?

2020 was a momentous year for higher education in Ireland, with a new government department created in the midst of a global pandemic. Events at home, not least the revised approach to the Leaving Cert exams, produced their own upheaval. This article offers an overview and summary analysis of the main events and casts an eye to future trends.

It is perhaps an understatement to say that 2020 was a more momentous year for higher education (HE) in Ireland than many of us were expecting. The creation of a government department for further and higher education – a new approach to third-level education in the Republic – came in the midst of a global pandemic that fundamentally disrupted teaching at all levels and had a distorting effect on third-level admissions. The events around the Leaving Certificate in 2020 might best be put behind us.

In the midst of all this disruption, however, it is possible to discern the seeds of a new attitude to higher education that, if followed through on, not least with funding, could set the scene for a radical revision of the approach of the last ten years, including in the research space.

Covid-19

When word came through on the morning of 12 March that all educational institutions would be closing their doors from 6 p.m. that evening, initially just for a few weeks, it was not a measure that had come out of thin air, but it was no less disruptive for that. Schools closed, and some laughed at the suggestion that they would remain closed for six months, yet that is exactly what happened.

Universities and other third-level colleges raced to put in place temporary online teaching so that students could finish an academic year which at that point had only a few weeks of teaching left, plus exams. Staff and students alike rushed to familiarise themselves with MS Teams, Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, and more, while emergency marks and standards were put in place to allow some level of mitigation to students, who found themselves trying to learn remotely in a country that has spent years struggling to provide universal internet access.

Though some deadlines were extended, others could not be. Our health system in particular required the timely arrival of its annual intake



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of hundreds of newly qualified doctors and nurses if it was to survive, so medical and nursing exams were brought forward. In the end, our third-level institutions extended their work into the summer and ensured that students got through.

The feared meltdown did not materialise, and, if anything, pass rates were up slightly across the country – a fact attributed by some to an increase in time spent on revision because of the closure of the usual places for socialising. That work was intensive, and as it became clear that the pandemic meant we would need online back-up plans for the new academic year, some universities instituted measures requiring staff to take a minimum amount of annual leave during the summer, for fear that one year would elide into preparations for the next and lead to burnout during the semester.

Institutions prepared for the new academic year amid great uncertainty about what would be required. Everyone recognised that it might be necessary to switch to online delivery at short notice, and colleges and universities tried to prepare for as much on-campus delivery as possible while simultaneously backing up material online. Individual requirements in cases where students or staff had medical conditions required more adjustment than ever before. Disciplines had to engage with professional bodies to make sure that any adjustments made did not invalidate the professional accreditation of the degree.

Hard decisions

1 metre vs 2 metres became a theme. A lack of specificity for HE in the Covid-19 guidelines led to some tension between management and academic unions about social distancing in the classroom, before new guidelines – on the Friday before the start of the semester for most universities – moved all but essential and small-group teaching online. For students, hard decisions had to be made about where to locate themselves for the semester. A suggestion made on the radio that students should go to college for the semester and stay there, in order to avoid spreading the virus, met with initial resistance in a country where the weekend trip home with the washing on packed buses and trains is the norm. In the end, a recommendation that everyone should have a single residential base was included in the guidelines when the six-week Level 5 scenario was introduced in mid-October.

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Important role of science and research

The role of science and of well-informed, evidence-based research and public debate was evident from the beginning of the pandemic. Our universities contributed significantly and substantively to the immediate exigencies of public health and patient care, particularly working closely with our hospitals and healthcare providers, while NPHET is chaired by Professor Philip Nolan, president of Maynooth University. As the crisis evolved, the need to ‘reimagine our humanity’ emerged as increasingly profound and existential, a point made by Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, president of NUI Galway, in a Moore Institute webinar on ‘Universities and the Covid-19 Crisis’.

Social isolation, mental health, intergenerational experiences, social inequality, the future of work, and rights and responsibilities came increasingly to the fore – issues that offer a broader canvas and demand a broader perspective in research in and beyond the medical matters of the moment. Our universities responded in turn with webinars, impactful engagement in a virtual world, and interdisciplinary research projects which will hopefully bear fruit as we emerge into another normal, our humanity reimagined.

Financial uncertainty

International recruitment appeared particularly threatened, which posed a challenge given the university sector's level of dependence on income from this source. Postgraduate Taught numbers dipped, though for many courses the impact on recruitment was mitigated by flexibility in the teaching modes of delivery and the hope that students may be able to attend in spring 2021. Junior Year Abroad was particularly badly hit, an impact that will be felt harder in colleges of arts than elsewhere in the sector. The July stimulus package offered by government was welcomed in all its dimensions, given the significant extra costs incurred by the sector in responding to Covid-19. It could not disguise the expectation, however, that institutions are likely to run at a deficit this academic year.

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The long-term consequences for staff and students are as yet unclear. New students are experiencing college life in a way that was previously unknown to most eighteen-year-olds, and more than ever they require resilience and self-motivation in the absence of the casual contact in class, eateries, social clubs, and communal living that are otherwise the norm. Though surveys have shown that many academic and professional staff would prefer a greater ability to work from home in the future, it can surely not be in the interests of eighteen-year-olds to be attending something akin to the Open University, where the student is typically someone mid-career who is highly motivated to put in the extra hours and has the maturity to cope with that experience.

Covid-19 has shown that the walls of our universities are permeable and that social interaction – for staff and students alike – is an aspect of the third-level experience that enhances the development of our young people in an irreplaceable way. It is probably also fair to say that if the staff experience of the last six months were to become permanent, it might attract a very different calibre of individual into academic life than is currently the case. Compromises will be essential.

Leaving Certificate

The 2020 Leaving Certificate was problematic, to put it mildly. Initial proposals to postpone it until August led to colleges and universities planning to admit first-year students in early November, two months after the early September start that all other students would have. Uncertainty around the publication date of the results meant that even this could not be confirmed, so that discussion also included the possibility of a January start – potentially leading to four consecutive semesters for first years, into

the spring of 2022, so that they would catch up by third year; or to those students being taught on a calendar-year basis, with summer break, for their entire degree. Either option would have been extraordinarily disruptive for third-level institutions, potentially requiring some staff to work for almost two years with barely a break, which could have challenged employment as well as health and safety legislation.

When the August plan was abandoned and replaced with a system of calculated grades, there was some trepidation. Teachers in schools had no experience of assessing their pupils' Leaving Cert grades, and immediately there were fears that these could be inflated. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) worked to put oversight and moderation of the grades in place, and this certainly had some effect. When the various jurisdictions in the UK published their estimated grades and it became clear that their approach, highlighted in Scotland in particular, had potentially disadvantaged pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the moderated grades there were raised back to the level of the teachers' original assessments, leading to significant grade inflation, with the result that many universities were oversubscribed.

The system used here was, in the end, more refined than that, but it did not prevent mass grade inflation, which did far more harm in the CAO system than was possible in the UCAS system. In the UK, students who took A levels or Scottish Highers in previous years are offered an unconditional place at the university they apply to, if they meet the entry standard. This has no bearing on the grades required of the current year's cohort, because the grades are set in advance. Thus, mass grade inflation simply meant the universities having to cope with more candidates meeting the grade. By contrast, the CAO system is predicated on the direct comparability of the Leaving Cert grades across the years. Mass inflation of grades in one year creates an imbalance that penalises all those applying with a previous year's Leaving Cert.

And that is exactly what happened. The DES's report on the process showed that the percentage of higher grades awarded this year, especially in higher-level subjects, was significantly above the equivalent percentages in the Leaving Cert for the previous three years, and this drove the mean grade upwards. Calculations showed that in 2017–2019 the mean had been 3.95, 3.97, and 3.98, a very steady set of results. In 2020 the calculated grades system produced a mean of 3.56, 10% higher than in previous years. The teachers' estimates had produced an even higher mean, 3.37, an increase of 15% on the last three years.

There had been no previous evidence to suggest that this year's cohort was 15% stronger academically than all those who had gone before. Inevitably, the minimum entry points went up for a large swathe of courses in the universities and beyond, threatening to leave students with a 2019, 2018, or earlier Leaving Cert outside the door. In the end, government found the funding for thousands of additional places in the hope that this would mitigate the sense of injustice felt by those students, and it seems to have helped.

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Still, some problems remain. The number of students admitted to third level in 2020 with a previous year's Leaving Cert ended around 15% lower than the average of the last three years. Some 2020 Leaving Cert students achieved points and entry to courses that they would not have achieved in a normal year, and the fear is that this may result in higher attrition in first year, especially given the far more challenging Covid-19 environment.

When it later transpired that coding errors had caused hundreds of students to obtain higher or lower grades than they were entitled to, that provided its own headaches. Once again, the institutions found ways to accommodate the extra 400+ students who were now entitled to a place on a course because of a raised grade, but many applicants who missed out narrowly were left wondering whether a student who had erroneously been given a higher grade by the coding error, and who would not now be downgraded, had taken the place that the student losing out would otherwise have been entitled to.

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Universities and colleges pulled out all the stops, but there is unanimous belief that we cannot and should not be in this position again. One issue is that extra funding a week before the start of the semester does not allow us to recruit the calibre of lecturer that the students are entitled to expect, quite aside from physical capacity issues when teaching returns to campus. In a rapidly evolving situation, everyone reacted as best they could, but we must learn lessons. In 2021 the Leaving Cert should run as normally as possible.

New Department: DFHRRIS

It was Micheál Martin, then Leader of the Opposition in the Dáil, who in July 2019 called for the establishment of a government department focused on higher education. He argued that the ‘packed agenda’ in education meant that ‘higher education tends to get marginalised’ and that such a department would have as its sole responsibility a ‘focus on higher education and the wider research and knowledge agenda’.

The latter point is critical. As John Walshe noted in *Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2019–2020*, William Beausang, then of the DES and now of the new department, had suggested that the approach to research funding that focused almost entirely on jobs and business should be broadened, and he was right to do so. He had also noted that since 2008 the allocation of budgets in the DES had shown third level to be the third priority in that department, firmly behind the primary and secondary sectors, with less money allocated despite significant growth in student numbers.

It is to Micheál Martin's credit that as Taoiseach he followed through on this in 2020 to create the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). A mouthful the title may be, but as its minister, Simon Harris, has said, more than 50% of the state's research budget is within its remit – to be allocated, it must be hoped, on criteria driven by more than just the needs of the economy. The title is a clear statement of the government's broad priorities in further and higher education.

It remains to be seen how the priorities of the new department will be mapped out and the extent to which it will draw on the expertise in the sectors in doing so. At the Irish Universities Association's (IUA) Future Ireland event on 23 October 2020, Minister Harris outlined his thinking, seeing the further and higher education sectors as a continuum. He indicated that work is under way on a new funding model for 'the FE/HE sector', as he called it, a lumping together that is often associated with a narrow, skills-based agenda. Yet he also, encouragingly, spoke about 'graduates who progress the way they want to' and in a way that 'meets the needs of an evolving economy and contributes to an inclusive society'. The second of these is at least as important as the first.

The Minister outlined the four pillars of his approach as 1. Innovation Island; 2. Island of Talent; 3. International Island; 4. Island of Inclusion and Engagement. He spoke about the Human Capital Initiative, which government has funded and which the HE and FE sectors have bought into. Micro-credentials are an important part of this initiative and could play a significant role in enhancing lifelong learning, the bedrock of any society that seeks to maintain and renew its talent base.

That principle should apply not only to the acquisition of new skills but to the maintenance and enhancement of existing skills. One need think only of the refresher courses, for example, that teachers in Germany are required to undertake at periodic intervals, outside normal teaching hours and weeks, but which are funded by the state.

Yet flexibility without addressing the core funding issue, one fears, may lead only to frustration on all sides. Extracting and adapting existing modules, as suggested by the Minister at that IUA event, requires significant work. Short-notice initiatives in a sector already working beyond capacity inevitably mean that many of those courses will be taught by part-time staff rather than professional full-time academics. This could lead to a proliferation of part-time contracts and precarious employment, because the institutions cannot undertake the budgetary risk associated with acquiring permanent staff by default or contracts of indefinite duration based on temporary funding for initiatives. A purely skills-driven agenda will also miss the core point that skills are but one aspect of education. It could easily become the undergraduate equivalent to the research funding agenda of recent years.

The thrust of what is being outlined so far is encouraging for the sector and has generated much goodwill, and no doubt there will be a positive approach from all sides in seeking to address the challenges of implementation. There is likely to be widespread support in the sector for an approach that recognises that the economy is just one part of the challenges facing society as a whole and the higher education sector in particular. Sustainability, human rights, and cultural and social development are equally important. Our graduates need to be not only useful to the economy but also critical, creative, and civic-minded members of society. As TCD Provost Paddy Prendergast said at the same event, we need graduates who have both 'the right skills and the right mindset'. The one without the other is only half a talent.

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The future

Some of the initiatives of recent years have continued apace through the changes and challenges. Round 2 of the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) aimed at enhancing the presence of women in HE leadership roles has been announced, and in the wider context the University of Limerick made the very welcome appointment of Ireland's first female university president, Professor Kerstin Mey. Prof. Mey, an East German with extensive experience in the North and Great Britain before she came to Limerick, is also from an Arts background, the first such appointment at the level of president in many years. As one of the most important aspects of any agenda for inclusion, this appointment is an important signal for the future in more ways than one.

The implementation of the Technological University agenda continues, and it will clock up its next success on 1 January 2021 with the creation of the Munster Technological University in Cork and Tralee, the post of president having been advertised in the autumn. The government also signalled its intention to enhance cross-border collaboration in the wake of Brexit, and Minister Harris met the Northern universities on 30 October to discuss possibilities. Matching funding from the UK government and/or the Northern Ireland Executive will be critical in this regard, as will the active engagement of the universities in the Republic in laying the landscape for taxpayer funding of cross-border initiatives at a potentially unprecedented scale. The Minister said he intends taking forward a programme of reform of governance of HE, something that has been mooted for several years without concrete action.

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One aspect of the HE experience that gained much traction this year was the issue of consent. Research showed that harassment, sexism, and sexual assault are the experience of too many staff and students. One colleague at UCD, Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, recalled how she had been harassed for two years by a senior colleague. A survey of more than 6,000 students carried out by the Active* Consent programme team at NUI Galway showed that a large percentage of students (29% of female students, 10% of male students, 28% of non-binary students) have been subject to sexual assault, and that many of them had not discussed it with anyone before the survey (49% of men assaulted, 35% of women, 25% of non-binary students). Many did not report the assault because they thought it was not serious enough. There is a clear need for full implementation of the 2019 Consent in Higher Education Institutions Framework, so that everyone – students and staff alike – understands the basic principle that consent should be clear, ongoing, mutual, and freely given.

Inclusion takes many forms, and respect is at the core of inclusion. As the Minister said unequivocally on 23 October: 'The University of the 21st century cannot just be an engine for economic growth; it must be a beacon of inclusion.' That is an agenda to which everyone can subscribe and which can sustain the work of the sector into the future. The work will be in the many facets of its implementation. This agenda, if unfolded across the piece, has the potential to usher in a new era for higher education in this country.