

Avoiding the Tyranny of Uniformity

Why the distinct features of third-level providers should be nurtured

Moves to create a 'unified' tertiary education system in Ireland run the risk of losing the diversity and uniqueness of each part of the system. Further education must be developed as an attractive end in itself, while ensuring that pathways to higher education are provided for those who want to take that route. Equally, there is a need to differentiate the missions of technological universities from those of the more established universities. Specialisation and innovation will drive excellence. Bland uniformity will lead us towards the lowest common denominator.



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Introduction

We're experiencing one of the most significant periods of change in Irish third-level education. At national level, we now have a dedicated government department (DFHERIS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) and a minister at the Cabinet table – a hugely welcome development for the sector and for the country as a whole. We have an updated legislative framework with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Bill 2022. The long-awaited government commitment to recognise and address the funding shortfall in higher education was finally confirmed in 2022. We now await delivery of the funding to close the €307m-per-year gap.

The creation of five new technological universities marks a significant change in the higher-education landscape. Across the wider third-level sector, the renewed prioritisation of apprenticeships under the National Apprenticeship Plan is a positive step to offering more diverse career options. The expansion of opportunities in further education is likewise welcome.

Much has yet to come. The delivery by government on its commitment to close the core funding gap will remain a priority in the immediate years ahead. A new Research Bill in 2023 will set the legislative framework for research and innovation for the longer term. The establishment of the new research funding agency, combining Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC), marks an important milestone. The development of a National Skills Plan that will emerge next year from the pending OECD Skills Report will have important implications for the sector. Other key policy initiatives – such as the rollout of the National Access Plan, an expansion in lifelong

learning provision, and the evolution of digital and blended learning – provide challenge and opportunity in equal measure.

The parts and the whole

A key overarching challenge, for both government (represented by DFHERIS and the various agencies) and the sector itself, is how best to bring together the different parts of the sector so as to optimise the opportunities and experience for students. This is the classic challenge of seeking to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. There is a real opportunity to foster innovation and to expand the choices and pathways for students in a reimagined third-level sector. Equally, there is a risk that diversity in the system will be lost if the wrong policy choices are made or if the distinct features of each part of the system are not nurtured and resourced.

DFHERIS is advancing proposals for a 'Unified Third-Level System'. Consultation has been undertaken, the results of which are due to be published by Minister Simon Harris before the end of 2022. Presumably, the outcome will shape, or certainly strongly influence, the policy direction on how the overall third-level system will develop and be resourced into the future.

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There is an absolute need to achieve better coordination across the third-level system. Minister Harris has rightly pointed to the skewed emphasis on going to college. He has pointed to a 'snobbish' culture in relation to higher education and the need to develop and encourage alternative pathways for school leavers. However, 'unification' of the system will not deliver that. What is required is better coordination and a removal of blockages in the pathways between different parts of third level.

While the overall ambition for better coordination is absolutely correct, the framing of this tertiary-education initiative under the term 'unified' is a mistake, at least in how it is presented. A dictionary definition of *unify* is 'to make or become united, uniform or whole'. Is uniformity what we need? Surely diversity and the enhancement of the unique capacity of each part of the third-level system are preferable?

There are two distinct elements to the uniformity challenge that is now arising. The first is to the need to develop distinct features for the different parts of the overall tertiary system. The second is the need to ensure that diversity remains a core feature of the higher education and university system in the context of the emergence of technological universities.

So, what about the first challenge? Higher and further education (FE) have their own distinct features and attributes. Further education must be developed and nurtured as an end in its own right, not just an alternative pathway into higher education. Yes, of course, some FE students may well go on to higher education. Our universities have had pathways in place for

many years with reserved places for FE students and are fully committed to optimising and expanding those pathways into the future.

The statistics on progression rates are good by international comparisons, but they also tell us that some students entering higher education are in the wrong place or the wrong course. We need to avoid placing people in higher education where this is not suitable. That can only be achieved by ensuring that the further education and apprenticeship options are positioned as valid and attractive options in and of themselves and not merely as second-choice pathways to higher education.

The uniformity challenge

The thrust to create viable alternative pathways for school leavers requires more than structural change. It also demands a change of culture across society. This cultural shift needs to be led from within the system, and it requires substantial change especially in the approach to career guidance in second level. The 2019 Indecon Review of Career Guidance, commissioned by the Department of Education, clearly identified the issues to be addressed and set down key recommendations on governance and delivery, career guidance tools and information, enhanced enterprise engagement, and the promotion of inclusion. Implementation of these recommendations needs to be accelerated.

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The synergistic benefits of the further and higher education sectors – where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – can only be realised if each part is functioning effectively in the first place. To enable this, the agreed funding deficits must be addressed, along with the structural and cultural barriers outlined above. That will then provide a fertile context for improved pathways and greater collaboration.

The second dimension of the uniformity challenge relates to the university sector. Five new technological universities have now been established. Their creation has received widespread political support, much of it based on the benefits of creating ‘university towns’ and the potential that this might offer. This is entirely valid. But there does not seem to be a widely understood or shared view of what makes these new universities different from the more established universities.

It is critically important that the focus and mission of technological universities be clearly articulated and understood. Many of the so-called traditional universities provide a range of courses and have advanced research capacity in technological disciplines, be it engineering, biopharma, information technology, robotics, medical devices, or otherwise. Some also have a strong regional footprint, and all have embedded relationships with enterprise.

So how will the new technological universities differentiate themselves and offer new and distinct elements of provision to their students and in their research activity? What is clear is that their missions, both collectively and individually, need to be distinctive if they are to pass the 'whole being better than the sum of the parts' test. Sameness and uniformity will not only fail to deliver additional benefit, it will also lead to unnecessary overlap and a waste of scarce resources.

The importance of diversity

The best universities in the world have distinctive features and are renowned for particular disciplines or courses. We cannot expect 10 or 12 Irish universities to be world-beaters in, say, cancer research. But it is entirely feasible and realistic to have one or two of our universities reach that goal while others focus on alternative specialties. Such distinctive excellence can only be achieved if it is appropriately resourced and in a system where individual university missions are nurtured. A uniform system does not enable that. The new System Performance Framework being developed by the HEA must also encourage this.

The capacity of universities, new or old, to achieve excellence also relies on a more devolved control structure. The new HEA Bill provides an opportunity to reset the operational relationship between universities and government. It provides a solid framework for accountability, with primary governance responsibility resting with the governing authority of individual universities. It is now essential that such devolved responsibility be enabled in a meaningful way by removing restrictive centralised controls such as the Employment Control Framework.

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In summary, we need a system that fosters the growth of a diverse set of universities with differentiated missions. We need to identify and nurture the distinct features of the new technological universities and avoid a one-size-fits-all uniformity. And we need to ensure that the further education system is developed with its own clear mission, not just as a pathway to higher education. We do not need to unify those parts of the system. Rather, we need to ensure that they are closely coordinated and that the synergies between them are fully exploited.

The renowned Irish writer, artist, and nationalist George Russell, better known under the pseudonym *Æ*, once said that 'the worst tyranny is uniformity'. Let us avoid such tyranny in Irish third-level education and instead foster diversity and innovation.