

Chuck Feeney: Transforming Higher Education in Ireland – the Example of University of Limerick

Introduction

Charles ‘Chuck’ Feeney passed away in October 2023, but his legacy has shaped and will shape the educational opportunities of several generations, as well as Ireland’s capabilities and capacity to advance its knowledge economy and promote social justice and inclusion. The North American entrepreneur and businessman focused a considerable portion of his generous gift on education and research, employing strategic philanthropy underpinned by a value-based vision to invigorate individual, collective, and societal ambitions and opportunities for knowledge and skills creation, acquisition, and application.

The Atlantic Philanthropies were set up as a charitable vehicle to identify investment opportunities for Chuck Feeney’s own benefaction, as well as garnering the support of people who subscribed to his philosophy of ‘giving while living’. Atlantic also worked to build relationships with government agencies and the third sector to catalyse impact. The foundation awarded grants in Ireland from 1987 up to 2016.

Chuck Feeney and UL

At the outset of Atlantic, Chuck Feeney developed an interest in Limerick. This was triggered by a chance encounter with the then president of the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE), Dr Ed Walsh, in the Kildare Street and University Club in Dublin (Walsh, 2011, p. 234). It seems to have been a meeting of two minds, with the NIHE leader understanding the potential and benefits of philanthropy for the development of an



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Chuck Feeney of the Atlantic Philanthropies has left a lasting legacy on higher education in Ireland. This article recounts how he came to invest in the University of Limerick and describes the various projects that his charity helped bring to fruition for UL. It also details the broader impact that Feeney has had on research and infrastructure in Irish higher education.

institute of higher learning and research, as demonstrated in a paper to the Planning Board in 1970 (Fleming, 2012, p. 233).

Taking up an initial invitation to visit Limerick in September 1987, the American Irish businessman, who was based in London at the time, made repeat visits to Plassey Campus over the next couple of years, some of them accompanied by delegations from Cornell University (Walsh, 2011). The Ivy League university had benefited significantly from Chuck Feeney's donations to expand its reach, create new programmes of study, and drive advancements in education and research, including Cornell Tech, the cutting-edge technology-focused campus in New York City.

Chuck Feeney was the catalyst behind the establishment of the University of Limerick (UL) Foundation as the vehicle to raise significant funds for developing the education institution, and he served as its first chairperson. Coming into being in 1988, the year before the NIHE received university status, Plassey Foundation was a first for Irish higher education institutions, which until then had had little engagement with philanthropy. With university status bestowed in 1989, and through the process of incorporation, the name of the independent fundraising vehicle changed to UL Foundation, signalling the new status awarded to Limerick's hard-fought-for higher education institution (Fleming, 2012).

Projects

One of the first acts of giving for UL was the provision of half of the funding to construct the first purpose-built concert hall after Irish independence. It was an ambitious project for the university to create a 1,100-seat state-of-the-art venue with high-quality acoustics in the aptly named Foundation building, which also offered a postgraduate library and study spaces for graduate students. At the same time, it addressed the region's need for a substantial contemporary performance space. Completed as a private-public partnership in 1993, with other monies coming from the State and private benefactors, it set an example of how philanthropy could leverage and underpin state support for capital infrastructure development.

In 1995, the Atlantic Philanthropies made a significant contribution to the design and construction costs of the purpose-built Library and Information Services Building. In 1997, construction of state-of-the-art sports facilities were enabled, including an Olympic-size 50-metre swimming pool on the South campus, which support elite athletes and the wider community to this day.

Alongside his gifts to Dublin City University and Trinity College Dublin, Chuck Feeney's donations to UL enabled the design and construction of most of the

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new buildings on Plassey campus in the 1990s and the campus expansion across the River Shannon into County Clare in the early 2000s.

The North campus is shaped significantly by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance (IWAMD), with its two performance spaces, rehearsal studios, study and teaching facilities, and the School of Medicine, home to the first programme of graduate-entry medicine in Ireland. Both buildings were enabled by Chuck Feeney. The appreciation for creativity that led to the establishment of IWAMD is also visible in the stunning mosaic by Desmond Kinney in its centre space. Another Kinney mosaic adorns the Foundation building.

A scholarship programme stimulated the beginnings of this unique performance study and research unit. Widening participation in the UL graduate-entry medical education programme was fostered through an Atlantic Philanthropies scholarship programme since 2007, and support was also given for student housing for the School of Medicine, alongside other grants towards student accommodation on campus.

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In 2011, Atlantic provided support for establishing 10 Bernal professorships in science and engineering, seeding capacity and capability in material sciences at UL that define a key research strength of the institution to this day. Other grants before then had supported the recruitment of research professors and postdoctoral researchers to enhance UL's capacity and capability for cutting-edge research. A range of innovative programmes and research, including in tourism, was enabled over the past three decades.

Legacy

Motivated by his value-driven approach, his commitment to education, access to knowledge, the furthering of knowledge creation, and his belief in the benefits of investing in talent, Chuck Feeney gave well over €100 million to the University of Limerick. His vision and foresight came also to the fore in making funds available to purchase additional land north of the River Shannon, required to complete the long-term development of the UL campus.

The public-private partnership approach that helped shape the capital infrastructure of many Irish universities was made fruitful to leverage support for knowledge generation and talent development, among other causes, by the Atlantic Philanthropies.

In 1998, Chuck Feeney proposed to invest €75m for research in higher education if the Irish government was able and willing to match this funding. Through one of the largest private gifts the state had ever received, the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL) was established and

served as a catalyst for advanced inquiry, talent development, and the delivered underpinning research infrastructure for universities and institutes of technology. The scale of the investment was remarkable then and remains so today.

The programme provided for approximately 103,000 m² of new research facilities, 46 research institutions or programmes, 1,000 research positions, and 1,600 new postgraduate positions. It also resulted in a direct commercial return on investment of €1.8 billion, while also providing significant research infrastructure, creating jobs, and stimulating indirect economic benefits.

Equally important, and unlike other competitive and prescriptive project-focused research funding, the PRTL I enabled participating institutions to develop their own research strategies; it thus supported the development of institutional research strengths and strategic research planning at all participating institutions (see Atlantic Philanthropies, 2016). It serves as an exemplar of what can be achieved when philanthropy, government, and institutions partner to revitalise, expand, and deepen research. An initiative of this scale and ambition is much needed today – Chuck Feeney demonstrated what is possible.

To this day, Chuck Feeney, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the US, has been the single most important donor for the University of Limerick and a catalyst for higher education on the island of Ireland. Yet, in the true spirit of philanthropy, he was determined to protect his privacy and remain anonymous for most of his active giving endeavours. It was only recently possible to acknowledge his munificent ‘giving while living’. All universities of Ireland, South and North, joined to award him an honorary doctorate of laws in 2012. UL and the UL Foundation recognised his generosity and benefaction in 2022 by naming the main avenue across the South campus ‘Feeney Way’.

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