

The Role, Value and Scale of Higher Education in Ireland

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Panel: Supporting Innovation

Contribution from Dr Richard Hayes, WIT

Higher education has always been encouraging of and facilitative of innovation—I suggest it is in the nature of HE institutions, to the extent that they are founded on independent and critical thought and have a predilection towards scepticism, to have at their core a constant compulsion towards “newness” that seems to me the definition of innovation. However, as higher education in Ireland changes rapidly (as is clear) and a new “landscape” begins to come into view, there is a danger that the potential for innovation will be diminished. I propose that the potential for innovation is linked to the role of Humanities disciplines and certain kinds of research; as the role of Humanities changes (or is forced to change), so it seems to me that the potential for HE to be truly innovative is compromised.

At first glance the emerging higher education landscape in Ireland does not look at all a comfortable place for the Humanities, at least not for the Humanities as these disciplines appear within that sector. The future for many IOTs, of course—including my own—is in the shape of a Technological University, the nature of which is described in the title and which seems, on the surface at least, entirely exclusive of Humanities disciplines. The kind of institution that is the TU is elaborated somewhat in some publications by the HEA; the emphasis in these documents is on the TU as an entrepreneurial, business- and commerce-focussed institution, with its responsibilities towards preparing students for “the world of work” indicative of the kind of relationship imagined between the university and business. With regard to research, it is understood that the TU will “Focus on applied, problem-oriented research and social and technological development and innovation, with direct social and economic impacts and public and private benefits in the region in which the

university is located". It is difficult, within a Humanities school, not to react with some nervousness, even despair, when the future of one's institution is described in these terms.

The battle seems to be lost against the forces that see HE as primarily providing educated and skilled workers for the economy and fulfilling a research agenda engineered to fuel that economy; in such a scenario, there seems little room for graduates of English literature or students working on Masters degrees in the performing arts—these have little "use" value in the knowledge economy. I think those of us in Humanities disciplines need to accept that the paradigm for HE has changed and will not change back; that feeling of inevitability deepens some of our despair, I think: what I mean is, the exclusion of Humanities, notwithstanding the popularity of the disciplines amongst students, would seem destined to continue into the future.

"Innovation", as a focal point for HE into the future, offers some promise as a notion around which to build a vision for Humanities in the future landscape—with its connotations of creativity and lateral thinking, its commitment to doing things in new ways. But, of course, the discourse of innovation is an exclusive one that seems to render innovation solely as a pillar of future economic development. The "innovation ecosystem" is, in other words, another name for a particular kind of exciting (agreed) and productive (conceded) mechanism that, nevertheless, is oriented towards economic development, and not much more. In this vision, Humanities has a place, but one relegated to a "service" role, as assisting with the development and maintenance of innovation ecosystems but not occupying some central place in such systems. In my own experience, Humanities might be called on as (say) a research project develops to provide legal expertise, or some editorial support to the funding application, or some support advice on dissemination—but not as a core player within the project, not as the determining force behind the research. And so with the TU: in the TU, such a vital component in the future higher education landscape, the Humanities will definitively *not* be the driving force, as they may well have been in other models for the university in the past.

Notwithstanding talk of triple- and quadruple helixes, the present and planned landscapes of higher education in Ireland assume, it seems to me, a very linear conception of the relationship between the State and HE with innovation acting as some kind of lubricant to the (economic) development engine—the State provides something of the framework (and the funding) to enable business and HE engage with one another in a way that leads to innovation (meaning largely new product development or new service model development), with consequent commercial impact. This linearity I think manifests itself in national policy on HE where the State has emerged as a particularly “directive” force, under the auspices of such ideas as value for money and even, one might argue, quality assurance. It is the very nature of the State’s direction of HE that for me undermines the capacity of HE to be innovative: this is the irony of it. In our own case (that of WIT), the State’s directiveness has manifested itself in what has been interpreted as extraordinary political interference in the Institute’s business and a frontal assault on institutional autonomy.

What we have is a particular kind of relationship between HE and the State that defines HE as an arm of policy and as a means for delivering certain economic (and political) imperatives. In these circumstances, it is no wonder that many in the Humanities disciplines—with their worrying over ideas of justice, truth, beauty, and with their keen sense of the historical, for instance—would feel marginalised, their future threatened. Moreover, the view that sees HE as a service provider to the State manifests itself also in student conceptions of educators—increasingly we too are being defined in terms of service provision. We need to conceive of a HE system as fundamentally about the formation, the cultivation of individual talent; the system we have, however, does not seem optimised to nurture that talent. This is so because we have allowed HE to be constructed as an arm of the State and, in doing so, have allowed mistrust enter education—it seems that the State’s mistrust of HE, and the public servants that run it, is replicated in the mistrusting structures in operation in our institutions.

What of the future? Whatever is supported (in funding terms) into the future, it must involve a reorientation of the agenda of institutions towards the business of graduate formation. I imagine a future landscape where HE constitutes a free space of open inquiry, where what is valued is that openness and freedom. This might manifest itself in support for

fundamental research, including research in Humanities; in strong support for programmes of civic engagement and democratic participation; and in an emphasis on diversity. In such a space, we shall see flourish the kind of free-thinking individual—the talent—that ultimately will drive innovation. Such an individual will be characterised by what Keats calls “negative capability”, “that is, when a man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”, a kind of suspension of certainty, a refusal of it, and a trust in uncertainty, which to me is at the heart of any innovation.