



***Towards Creating a  
Research Agenda on  
Higher Education in Ireland***

Presentation to Swan Group Conference on  
***Ireland's Knowledge Economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:***

***Educational Perspectives***

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\*Comments/views expressed in this presentation are entirely personal

- I. Context**
- II. Overview of Irish HE Policy**
- III. Different types of Research Questions**
- IV. Why is HE research important?**

# I. Context



- 1. Current focus on higher education (HE) in context of the 'Knowledge Economy' (e.g., Lisbon)**
- 2. Focus on increased rates of participation in HE and 'implicit' distinction between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> levels – explicit in the Irish case**
- 3. International metrics and reference points for HE**
- 4. Economic significance of global education market**
- 5. Ireland's size, 'educational history' and fiscal constraints**

## II. Overview of Irish HE Policy



- 1. Historically low participation levels**
- 2. Relatively large numbers of HE Institutions**
- 3. Relatively poor staff/student ratios**
- 4. Education was seen as 'social spend' with student numbers only mattering**
- 5. Negligible direct funding for research**

# Early-Mid 1990s



## **Increased student numbers, based on**

Demography – equal chance to larger cohort

Reduced unemployment rates (transition year)

## **Concern with implications after the peak**

Mature students

Foreign students

## **Abolition of Student fees**

Increased demand with inadequate funds to meet supply

Limited engagement with any kind of planning process

## **Difficulty of managing larger and changing scale**

Introduction of unit cost type funding mechanisms

# Late 1990s



## **Education White Paper**

already very out of date?

## **Universities Act**

more/less autonomy?

## **Lisbon Agenda adopted vigorously by Ireland**

Clarity of what it meant?

## **Introduction of research-based spending,**

linked to capital needs

## **Organisational developments: Creation of**

new institutions / institutional frameworks

# Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century



## Competing targets set:

Achieve excellence while guaranteeing equality

Increase participation (3<sup>rd</sup> Level) and improve quality

Expand at 4<sup>th</sup> Level, while maintaining activities at 3<sup>rd</sup>

## Budgetary Complications

At 3<sup>rd</sup> level, funding relating to 'throughput'

At 4<sup>th</sup> level, funding is uncertain

## Complex relationships between Institutions

Compete for staff / students / resources

Cooperate to get specific funding

# Funding Commitments linked to Enterprise Sector



## Declared need for adaptive/flexible HE system to allow Ireland to

- Respond to global changes
- Meet needs of individuals and enterprises
- Benefit from new methods of delivery
- Support high levels of life-long learning
- Be innovative in commercialising research  
→ *Pressure for managerial model*

# Knowledge Backdrop



Very scant statistical data until recently

Very scant administrative data available

Very scant 'domestic' research so far especially from an economics perspective – issue not just for Ireland

Unclear sources of policy/model influences – OECD, EU, UK, Australia??

Adoption of international metrics approach can be problematical...

# III. Different types of Research Questions



- Research on Higher Education generally
- Research on HE and Labour Market / Growth
- Research on HE Training/Research and Innovation
- Research on HE and Equality
- Policy-focused Research
- Systems/Organisational Research

# Research on Higher Education Generally



- What are the determinants of participation in HE?
- What are the costs of participating in HE?
- Methodologies for measuring the costs of producing different graduates
- Cost effectiveness of undergraduate teaching methodologies
- Cost effectiveness of postgraduate training methods

# Research on HE and Labour Market / Growth



- What is the social return on investment in higher education at 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> levels?

*Models needed to explore this at macro/micro level*

- How does HE influence subsequent labour market outcomes, including employment chances, occupational group and wages?

*Cross-sectional data needed that match employee and employer details*

*Longitudinal data needed to do this properly – taking account of socio-economic factors, school experiences, individual characteristics, etc.*

# Research on HE Training/ Research and Innovation



- What is the impact of public R&D expenditure on innovation / R&D
- Characteristics analysis of graduate students
- What is the employment experience of postgraduate students – 3, 5 years after completion of PhDs?
- What are Duration and Attrition rates in PhD programmes?
- What is the impact of changed funding and incentives on HE researchers?

# Research on HE and Equality



- Further research needed on how participation at 3<sup>rd</sup> level has changed across regions and socio-economic groups over time, and how the performance at 3<sup>rd</sup> level varies across different groups?
- How has participation at 4<sup>th</sup> level changed across different socio-economic groups over time?
- Is there evidence of increases or reductions in the 'pathways' operating through the HE system?

# Policy-Focussed Research



Need for serious (independent) reviews of research and educational programmes distinguishing

- *Short run effects*
- *Medium term effects*
- *Long run focus*

Analysis of the Objectives of Higher Education Policy and the system of Incentives (institutional/individual) in place to achieve those objectives

# Systems/Organisational Research – 3<sup>rd</sup> Level



What should determine the appropriate system scale?

What should determine the appropriate degree of institutional heterogeneity?

Is there an optimal mixture of students and an appropriate quality of education for Ireland?

What is the funding model to be? What incentives should it create?

# Systems/Organisational Research - 4th Level



What should determine the appropriate scale?

What should determine the focus of the fourth level itself and the requirements for the quality/skill mix?

What should determine the National / International mix? How do we handle the global dimension?

What is the funding model and what incentives should it create?

## IV. Why is HE research important?



If HE is crucial to future growth/ prosperity, then we need to 'get it right'

HE costs a lot – we need to make sure public funds are well spent

HE represents private and social returns and the system needs to be designed to account for this

HE is about more than economics and we need to factor in the other elements