

The World of Higher Education Podcast
Season 1, Episode 11: Higher Education in Ireland
Guest: Ellen Hazelkorn

Alex Usher (AU): Hi Everyone. I'm Alex Usher and this is The World of Higher Education podcast.

Today we are talking all things Irish higher education, and joining us as our expert guide to the terrain is Ellen Hazelkorn, principal at BH Associates, a Higher Education consultancy in Ireland, a Professor Emerita at the Technological University of Dublin and one of the sharpest all-around minds in European higher education.

Ireland, like many small countries, has to punch way above its weight to get noticed. At just over five million inhabitants, it's in a category with Slovakia, Norway and New Zealand, or – in North American terms – South Carolina, Alabama or British Columbia. In higher education, where scale matters a lot, small size puts a crimp in what you can do. You need to make choices and be explicit and hard-headed about them.

But Ireland had an advantage which helped it at least partially overcome this challenge. Although today it is well-known for its tech miracle, it wasn't that long ago that the country was one of Europe's economic and social laggards. This was also true with respect to higher education. Ireland trailed most of Europe by ten to fifteen years in massifying its higher education system, and as Ellen notes in our talk, the country's universities only really gained a research mission at the turn of the millennium. But falling meant the higher education sector could learn from other countries' success and mistakes. In some ways, it makes higher education policy-making there a much more evidence-informed affair than it is in places like Canada, the UK or the United States.

But this year in particular, the pace of policy-making there has really sped up. In the past twelve months, Simon Harris, the country's Energizer Bunny of a Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (try saying that three times quickly), has not only piloted a new Higher Education Act through the Irish Parliament, but also announced and sent out for consultation a new "Unified Tertiary Education System" policy designed to overcome the country's traditional binary split between what we in North America would call the University/Community College divide. Do pay attention to how Ellen describes this policy: to the extent that this policy has a centre it's mostly about pathways and transitions, but the ulterior drivers it seems are first, to increase post-secondary learning out beyond the traditional 18-21 age group and second, to increase the prestige of the non-university post-secondary sector. Since the latter is very much an issue in many parts of the world, I am sure this is a policy initiative that many people outside Ireland will want to follow.

But enough from me. Let's let Ellen do the explaining. Have a listen.

Alex Usher (AU): Ellen, thanks so much for being with us today.

Ellen Hazelkorn (EH): Thanks very much Alex asking me.

AU: Let's start out by explaining the Irish higher education system to everybody. To my eye, for a country that's relatively small, it's a pretty heavily differentiated system. You've got universities, and institutes of technology, and technological universities, constituent colleges, college of Education. Can you explain a little bit how Irish Higher Education is structured to an international audience? What are the key pieces? What are the quirky peculiarities that people need to know?

EH: It's been a bit all over the place, but it's much more focused coming into play. We have the traditional universities, if you want to put it that way, of which there are seven of them. Then we had the Institutes of Technology, which developed starting in the 1970s as regional technical colleges. Under legislation that came through about 2018, we now have technological universities (TUs), where these institutes of technology could merge, and only on the basis of merging they could be assessed and re-designated. So it was a whole process. So, we've reduced the 14 institutes now down to five TUs and two institutes still there. So that kind of gives it's Ireland version of a California system, but the TUs offer all qualifications; from sub degree up to doctoral level. So, they started off as regional development kind of drivers.

AU: So, they would be the equivalent of the California state universities? The universities, the Trinity College? That would be the equivalent of Berkeley and the UCs?

EH: Arguably. Now, no one uses that and it's not a comparison that's ever used, but it's perhaps a handy way to look at it. Then we have the further education colleges, which are themselves in the process of that whole sector being developed because it emerged out of the local government and so on. And so the FET, further education and training, are a bit like the community colleges. Sub-degree only.

AU: One of the things that has distinguished Ireland internationally over the years I guess was its move to eliminate tuition fees at a time when other countries like Australia, New Zealand, the UK, were introducing them but then later mandatory fees were reinstated, but not called tuition fees. What have students actually paid to go to university in Ireland in recent years? What's been the effect of this policy over the last three decades? Is it a plus? Is it a minus?

EH: Well, it was introduced in the mid-nineties by the Labor Party, when it was in government, with the idea of taking on where changes to secondary education were introduced in the 1960s and all. That was about free education, expanding access, equity and so on. So, on that basic principle of has it done anything to deal with equity? Not really. So, what is it that students pay? The tuition fees disappeared, but then obviously we have a hole in the bucket. So, they started to be called a student contribution. Originally it was about registration and it was small amounts of money. It's now up to about 3000 euros. Last year, the minister announced that he was, for the sake of various issues like the cost of living crisis and so on, a thousand euros were taken off it. It's now coming back in, but there'll be some more income related standards. It's important to keep in mind that almost 50% of students don't pay any fees at all because of the fact that there are grants that come under the income limits. It's largely been a transfer to the middle class and the equity issue has not really changed. And the bigger problem is what will they do going forward? It's really hard to say. There's not enough money to make it free for all someone has to pay. But this is always an issue. We want to be a Nordic type society, but we don't want to pay Nordic type taxes.

AU: That's a classic dilemma. Apart from this one-year thing, it seems to me the last 12 months have been very, very almost hyperactive in higher education policy in Ireland. Last fall, the Oireachtas, that's Ireland's parliament, approved a new higher education Act. From across the Atlantic, I can't say I understand the ins and outs of this. All I know is it seemed to cause a lot of heartache in the university sector due to a perceived reduction in institutional autonomy. What were the acts most consequential changes and to what extent was it a power grab by the state?

EH: The original Act came in 1971. It set up the higher education authority as the intermediary body like you find in varying countries. It largely was a policy guidance and funding organization. The new legislation basically covers a lot of the initiatives and actions that have been going on over the last 10 years. This is post what's called the National Strategy for Higher Education, which came out in

2011, which has really set the ground for a lot of these things. So that's a really important timeline. So since then, well not just since then, but the HEA has been taking on a lot of rules, one of which is compacts and funding arrangements and strategic dialogues and issues around that for which there's no legislation. So that's a big part of what was happening

AU: Now, in addition to all this your Higher Education Minister, Simon Harris, not only has he put it through a new act, he's also started the process of creating a unified tertiary education system in Ireland. My understanding is the idea here is to create more bridges between what we in North America would call the community college and university sectors. I know you've been working on this as a project with your firm for the last little while. What's the story here? What are they really trying to achieve?

EH: I suspect a lot of it is driven by issues of equity and access. Ireland isn't out on its own on this issue, but one of the challenges for the system is that we have almost 70% of our student population - and we're really talking 18- to 22-year-olds, there's really no adult learners to a big extent - 70% of our student population in higher education. We have the highest level of student attainment across Europe and almost third in the EU and the OECD. So, we are way up there with the numbers of people in higher ed and going to university is really the only game in town. We have maybe about 20% in further education and about 13.5% NEETS (not in employment, education, or training). So, some of the issues have to do with equity. So yes, a lot of pathways, which arguably just really reinforces issue that a university qualification is the only way to go. We see this trend everywhere, where going to university is really the big deal. Then we have this other issue of hauling out of the middle level skills and a huge list of jobs or types of occupations on the critical skills list. I mean huge and it's a rapidly growing economy. Ireland is now one of the fastest growing economies and has been in Europe. So, the unified system is all part of that and trying to work out not just pathways, but you're right, that's been the main focus, but I'd say what is further education and training? How do we make the system more horizontally diverse and attractive rather than just hierarchical?

AU: Help me with the theory of change here: how does making a unified system of higher education make it possible for a greater differentiation and diversification?

EH: Well, that's the trick because all we've got really is the issue of "this is what we want to achieve of a unified tertiary system," which is basically seen as porous, and people can come in and out of the education and research system anywhere. Yet most of the focus tends to be, when we talk about it, that we're short on details. So, I expect that's where myself and my colleague come in. What do we actually mean by this? Most of the attention has indeed been on pathways.

AU: Ireland was fairly late to the game compared to some of the larger European countries in terms of developing a significant research capacity at its universities. Like a lot of small countries, it seems to me it faces some pretty tough questions about what its research effort is for. How much of this is basic research? How much of it is applied research? What should be expected to accomplish? How has Ireland's strategy on research changed over the years and where's it heading now?

EH: It was very late to the game. I mean, arguably there was no such thing as Irish research before the millennium. Indeed Science Foundation Ireland was only set up in 2000 which is now funds big scale projects and it funds research centers. We then have the Irish Research Council which is Ireland's ERC, European Research Counseling, it funds individuals. These two are now about to merge, new legislation coming through. So more changes in the landscape, more arguably you could say coherence, but more changes in the landscape. And not enough funding, that's always been an issue, but increasingly a big push on - I don't like divisions between basic and applied - but certainly

more partnering, more impact, more innovation, more support for entrepreneurs and startups. More, more, more, more.

AU: How is impact defined? That's key one for us.

EH: It's always a key one. Companies. Can you set up companies and be sustainable?

AU: Speaking of partnerships: in our work at higher education strategy, we've been very interested in some of the experiments we've seen in Ireland promoting applied research, and in particular partnerships between small and medium enterprises and colleges and institutes of technology. What can you tell us about these projects? Are they a success?

EH: They vary. They're quite small. I mean, we're talking micro here and we're not talking hundreds but we're talking a few, in some cases called kitchen table operations. So we're talking small and there has been funding for a while for small scale stuff to support universities take having students work on projects, you know business processing and stuff like this. The big thing about the unified system idea is what role VET plays in this in terms of advanced engineering and so on. So, I've done some work with the JRC, that's the Joint Reserve Council for the EU, and looking at smart specialization in VET. This is really a question of how do sub-degree areas and so on that whole vocational education and training sector can add to, and what capacities do they have? So on the notion that people are stickier than knowledge, how does that work with keeping companies and building sustainability? Lots of ideas and I mean, there's some evidence of working with it, but has it been a big player? No. And what you've got is this division between the larger universities focused on the big internationals and the FDI companies. Then you've had the IOTs, now the TUs, to be focused on the SMEs. Does it work that well? Can you divide it that way? Many of these companies, I just don't have the absorptive capacity, they don't have the time. So what are the new mechanisms? But that certainly is on the TU to try and work that out.

AU: You can't work it out without some experimentation, right? I mean, I guess this is just sort of a "let's throw some stuff at the wall and see what works."

EH: Absolutely. We are working with one of the local councils to try and develop strategies for one of the universities that might work. But you also need to look at governance arrangements so it's not just ad hoc, and that it's embedded, and that the university takes it on as whole, which is another whole set of objectives, if you wanted to say that.

AU: We're coming to the end here. I got one last question for you, and it's one of my favorite trivia questions about higher education. The Irish Republic reserves a number of seats, and I think it's three, in its upper house, for universities. So, there are university seats in the Senate, and these are filled by special elections of alumni from various institutions. This is pretty idiosyncratic. Does it help universities or does it hurt universities in the sense that they are overtly political actors like that, that they've got seats and therefore in theory can hold a balance of power?

EH: Well, the Upper House is a vocationally organized one, aside from the 11 appointments by the Prime Minister and there's six university appointments. So, it divided down that Trinity had three, because of course, Trinity was out on its own. And the other three went to the National University of Ireland, which is now...

AU: Several different institutions.

EH: Exactly but in 1979, there was a constitutional referendum saying, "what about the rest of our graduates?" Which passed and zilch was done about it. Now, only in the past weeks, yet again, a graduate of the University of Limerick, which is not included in this ca cadre, won a case in the Supreme Court to say that the current situation is unconstitutional. It now just feeds into a general discussion as to whether or not the organization for the Seanad as it's called is appropriate for today. So, there are several panels like the agricultural panel, the industry panel, and this kind of formed the university groups. It's kind of unusual. I haven't answered your question whether it puts universities in an awkward spot, but it's interesting.

AU: Okay. I'm going to push you. Does it, does it help them or does it hurt them?

EH: Well, I can't say it's particularly helped. It's supposed to have brought - a bit like the House of Lords if I could use a poor comparison - the Seanad is supposed to bring a smaller body of 60 people, it's supposed to bring a more erudite level of discussion with people who know something in particular fields. I suspect that the university members have always made important contributions. Has it helped the universities? Well, it hasn't harmed them, but the fact that they're not representative of the university graduates is a big issue.

AU: Ellen, thanks so much for being with us today.

EH: You're very welcome.