

Trends and Propositions to Provoke Debate about the Future of Higher Education

Ellen Hazelkorn and Tom Boland

The world is in a state of flux, and the future is less predictable than ever. What are the implications of international megatrends on higher education? How should we think about the longer-term issues that will be important for our higher education institutions (HEIs), staff, current and future students, society, and economy? What administrative and governance structures will we need? And how is the system to be paid for?

The European Commission made a significant contribution to the policy debate when it published its roadmap for higher education last January: [European Strategy for Universities and Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European Higher Education cooperation](#). In [Strengthening the Sustainability, Quality and Competitiveness of Irish Higher Education: Trends and Propositions to Provoke Debate](#), we review key trends with implications for the direction of higher education in Ireland.

Macro-Trends and Implications

It is time to rethink the model of “mass participation” higher education. Ireland has been privileged by student demand, but this has forestalled closer scrutiny of trends and innovation. The tertiary attainment level is 55 percent of 30–34 year-olds (compared to the EU average of 40.3 percent approximately). Seventy percent of secondary students transfer to tertiary education. Yet, despite this expansion, the model of education provision has remained relatively unchanged, as if it was still a system catering to an elite. Policy and program structures are too focused around a linear educational pathway, whereby students progress from primary to secondary to tertiary and then into work in their 20s—and fail to recognize that greater innovation and flexibility is required for different types of learners pursuing different types of programs over their lifetime.

We need a comprehensive higher education management information system. Without a system for collecting, analyzing, and reporting on data (both qualitative and quantitative), we cannot know how well our system is doing and plan accordingly. Essentially, we have outsourced this crucial function to rankings and other such data systems.

Ireland is playing catch-up in the digital revolution. Irish HEIs rightly won praise for rapidly changing the educational format from on-campus to online in response to COVID. But an emergency response is not equivalent to high-quality online or blended learning. Competing successfully in the twenty-first century requires a step change in approach and investment. A systemic and strategic approach is necessary rather than an institutional, competitive approach.

A well-functioning national research system is needed. The Irish research, science, and innovation landscape has been transformed since the start of the millennium. But we have no research policy/strategy. We have individual agency strategies, but that is not the same—indeed we have competing strategies.

What about funding for sustainability? Funding models beget the system and if the future reality is different, then the funding model that supports it needs to change accordingly. Government enjoys the political kudos of once-off initiatives but this is not a funding policy—especially as we enter headwinds post-COVID and from the war in Ukraine, and face growing and competing demands from elsewhere in the political and public system.

Last but not least, strengthening the steering core and heartland is important. Higher education’s greatest asset is the quality of its people, academics and researchers, but also professional, technical, and maintenance staff, who are too frequently overlooked.

Abstract

This article reviews key trends with implications for the future direction of higher education in Ireland, including developments at the EU level. The implications are discussed with a particular focus on issues potentially impacting on the sustainability and performance of higher education institutions, and those that appear to create significant opportunities for the sector. Arising from this assessment, propositions are set out to provoke a debate.

We spend much time talking about HEIs producing human capital, but too little time thinking about the human capital of our HEIs.

Propositions to Provoke Debate

There are three dominant messages. First, a system approach can deliver the greatest collective impact and economies of scale. Second, change is coming. Ireland is either in the vanguard or it will be left behind. Third, tertiary education policy should utilize an equity and inclusiveness lens. The present system—to a very great extent—perpetuates past privilege.

Below, we summarize the propositions from the original paper. Unlike recommendations that propose specific actions, a proposition is like an onion, capable of being unravelled, dissected, and adapted. In the first place, we propose to develop a coordinated, collaborative higher education, research, and innovation system. For that purpose, it is important to establish the Tertiary Education and Research Authority (TERA) to provide policy advice on, and regulation of, the entire system. This includes strengthening the HEI-based research system, supporting challenge-based collaborative centers, achieving a better balance between social and technological innovation, and building a sustainable researcher pipeline. Regional knowledge and innovation clusters should form the primary policy instrument for greater regional sustainability through collaboration between education providers, business, and civic society. And private higher education needs to be integrated into the tertiary education system with formal governance and contractual arrangements.

Secondly, it is important to widen educational opportunities and improve outcomes. For that reason, further education/technical and vocational education and training (TVET) should be a central player in the education and training system, on equal terms with higher education. To balance demand, a cap should be introduced on student numbers entering higher education. A national credit accumulation and transfer system is needed to provide opportunities for learners of all ages and ability to build credits and credentials over time and carry them from one program/institution (or form of education and training) to another. It is important to empower students to tailor their entry, exit, assessment, and qualifications to their personally determined needs, rather than require them to fit a standardized model. And there is a need for more focus on work-based/work-informed learning, employability, and work placements, competency-based education (CBE), new forms of apprenticeship, and new forms of credentials.

Thirdly, Ireland needs to strengthen the infrastructure and establish a national digital platform as a shared digital infrastructure promoting and supporting open access solutions and scholarly and other resources, data and analytics, training, advice, and other services for education and research, libraries/museums, other public services, and society at large. And it needs to establish a national research information management system to collect and manage higher education and research data and analyze and plan accordingly. While context is important, many of the issues discussed and propositions made have relevance for other small or medium-sized systems. ▲

Ellen Hazelkorn and Tom Boland are founders of BH Associates education consultants. Email: info@bhassociates.eu.

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