

Review of Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective, by Patrick Clancy, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 2015*

Delma Byrne

Maynooth University

Patrick Clancy's examination of Irish Higher Education in comparative aspect is a welcome consolidation and framing of Irish HE policy alongside wider European and International developments. This book represents an important analysis of recent trends in Higher Education in Ireland, and it carries considerable weight as it comes from Pat Clancy, whose relationship with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) goes back to 1978. There are three particularly interesting aspects of the book. Firstly, over 13 chapters, we are offered a very comprehensive location of Irish HE within other European/International systems. Secondly, the volume moves beyond issues of participation and access to higher education to include aspects of Higher Education (HE) pertaining to the academic workforce/profession, research, funding, governance and reform as well as future challenges. Finally, the book offers a strong critique of recent higher education policy in Ireland, particularly policy developments since the Hunt report which set out the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011).

The introductory chapter provides a strong critique of current Higher Education policy in the Republic of Ireland. In doing so, Clancy places considerable attention to the changing relationship between universities, other higher education institutions and the state; indicating changing patterns of governance whereby the objectives of HE are increasingly defined by the state rather than by the

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academy, and emphasising a fundamental shift in the autonomy/accountability balance, through a heightened state-directed reform agenda. A policy direction towards sectoral re-organisation and the advent of a new funding approach to HE through the use of performance compacts is strongly critiqued as evidence of the rise of the evaluative state, complemented by a rise in managerialism. A further key argument being made is that the growing importance of knowledge, research and innovation in a globalised world are changing the social role of the universities and higher education institutions, with implications for the roles that higher education is expected to play. To this end, it is argued: 'Higher education not only has become responsible for the development of human capital but is positioned at the heart of the 'knowledge triangle' of education, research, and innovation designed to improve competitiveness and economic growth' (pg 2). Linking the local to the global, he argues that reform initiatives that seek to transform higher education institutions into better-managed higher quality organisations that more directly contribute to national development, points in the direction of greater isomorphism with globally favoured models of the university and higher education. As a result, we are prompted to reconsider the mission and aims of Higher Education which he argues has been distorted by the priority of instrumental and utilitarian objectives, and the privileging of economic development objectives to the neglect of personal development and cultural objectives.

The subsequent four chapters focus broadly on the dynamics of structural and demographic features of the higher education system - 'Expansion and Diversification of Higher Education Systems', 'Measuring Participation in Higher Education' - and processes underlying the operation of the system 'Admission and Retention in Higher Education', and 'The Student Experience: Curriculum and Social Conditions'. While there has been considerable sustained and ongoing engagement with these topics by academics working in Ireland, clear contributions are derived from the comparative lens. For example, the Irish experience of expansion and diversification of HE mirrored that of the experience of most European countries, and according to the higher education participation index, Ireland is now represented within the top one-third of 28 countries. New insights are offered around the age and gender profile of HE participants: Ireland has the fifth highest concentration of students aged less than 20, and given the sustained increase in mature student representation we are now in line with other OECD countries with regard to the representation of mature students in HE. There is stability in gender patterns at HE, as the trend of

increasing female dominance has halted: a pattern evident in about one-third of OECD countries. While there is less emphasis on higher education and recent migratory trends, the internationalisation of education and cross-border flows of students also comes into investigation. Trends in HE participation in Ireland have many commonalities with other systems, yet it would appear that a certain distinctiveness around Irish HE emerges, which is outside the remit of the book, and so is not fully articulated.

The next six chapters focus on 'The Academic Profession', 'Research in Higher Education', 'Higher Education and the Labour Market', 'Funding Higher Education', 'Governance and Steering' and 'Structural Reform of the System'. In these chapters, we obtain insight into processes of globalisation in higher education, and the evaluative state. Accounts of comparisons of Ireland and other European/OECD countries extend to the earnings of higher education graduates, the funding for higher education, comparative trends in governance, and models and experiences of structural reform of higher education systems. It is through these comparative experiences that the local is linked to the global, where we derive an understanding of commonalities in changing patterns of governance, and arguments relating to the (changing) social role of higher education institutions are intensified. These chapters also offer an account of the advances that have been made in the Irish context, and an insight into the lessons that have been learned in other institutional contexts. There is considerable space allocated to the very topical issue of the funding of higher education. In chapter 10, the importance of maintaining a research infrastructure and a favourable research climate is to the fore, as is a concern with the impact of the recession and state decisions made around the funding of higher education. The issue of cost-sharing is addressed and there is a warning issued against the implementation of a loan scheme for students under the current economic climate. The issue of precariousness and the causalisation of the workforce in Irish HE were less explored.

The final chapter then addresses the challenges ahead for Irish Higher Education under six general titles. These include funding (at the macro, meso and micro levels), flexibility of provision (part-time participation, labour market activation programmes, digital technology and MOOCs), expansion and inclusion (limits of expansion, intractable inequalities, differentiation), quality issues (quality of learning, grade inflation), steering and policy contestation, and sustaining mission diversity.

The strength of this book lies in its scope, comparative perspective and critical thought around the issues presented. A solid institutional knowledge of the workings of the Irish Higher Education system in comparative aspect is supported by the excellent use of data to illustrate the arguments being presented, alongside an outstanding review of the empirical and policy literatures. The publication of this book is very timely, and fills a considerable gap in the Irish literature. It will be of great benefit to not only students and staff working in education, but to policy makers, key stakeholders and the international academic community.