

Exploring the Public Value of Higher Education: An Exploratory Case Study of an Irish HEI.

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Abstract.

Given the substantial amounts of public money spent on higher education, governments are demanding greater accountability for how this money is spent and what is being achieved with the allocated funds. A New Public Management (NPM) approach requires a more business-like approach by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with an emphasis on graduate employment, research impact, and diversified funding. However, critics of a NPM approach to higher education suggest that higher education is a public good with a wide range of objectives. An alternative approach uses public value and this approach examines the contribution of public sector organisations to the economic, social, and environmental well-being of society. This suggests that one of the key goals of HEIs is to offer greater opportunity to a wider range of students. This research examined the contribution of the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (ITB - now part of TU Dublin) to its students/graduates through a mixed-methods approach involving interviews and reviewing published reports. The research finds ITB allowed a wider range of students to benefit from higher education and this resulted in higher employment levels, higher salaries, and greater opportunity.

Keywords: Higher Education, Impact, Public good

1. Introduction.

Governments across the world are investing substantial amounts of money in expanding access to higher education to a wider number of people, with average spending on third level education among members of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) amounting to 1.4 % of national wealth. In Ireland, over 246,000 learners were enrolled in third

level institutes in 2021/22¹. Furthermore, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has a budget for 2022 of €3.7 billion³. Given the large sums spent on Higher Education, there are ongoing demands for greater accountability for ensuring that Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are achieving national objectives such as increasing access to higher education to a wider range of people. A New Public Management (NPM) perspective requires HEIs to be efficient in terms of their productivity and costs and being effective in terms of research impact and employability of their graduates, attract foreign students and set up campuses abroad (Hensley et al. 2013). This has also required HEIs to diversify their funding (Broucker et al., 2018). The impact of NPM on HEIs has been criticized as it diminishes higher education to being little more than job training (Giroux, 2010) and reduces the role of higher education as a public good (Sutton, 2017). Other criticisms of NPM include that there is too much emphasis on measurable goals, particularly efficiency and effectiveness, and that there is too much of an internal focus (Broucker et al., 2018).

An alternative to NPM is the concept of public value, which argues that public sector organisations (PSOs) must create something that is valuable, is politically sustainable and legitimate. (Moore, 1995). This requires PSOs to examine their contribution to the economic, social and environmental well-being of society (O'Flynn, 2007). A public value perspective would suggest that HEIs need to put economic and social well-being at the core of a broader set of outcomes, that policy objectives need to be discussed with a wider set of stakeholders and that there is accountability to these stakeholders (Broucker et al., 2018). It is argued that higher education is a public good and should offer equality of opportunity (Giroux, 2010). It is also suggested that there needs to be a broad perspective on the benefits of higher education which takes into account the objectives set out by all stakeholders (Broucker et al., 2018). This also requires higher education institutes (HEIs) to optimise their social benefits (Cremonini et al., 2014). Therefore, society requires HEIs to achieve the desired outcomes such as greater access to higher education, operate fairly and justly, and for society's benefit (Bryson et al., 2014).

This research examined higher education through a public value lens and reviewed the benefits derived from attending a HEI in Ireland (the Blanchardstown Campus of

¹ [Higher Education Key Facts and Figures 2021-22](#)

Technological University Dublin, formerly the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, and hereafter referred to as ITB) from the perspective of two key stakeholders - graduates and undergraduates. These benefits include higher earnings and employment levels, and greater access to higher education from a wider cohort of students. In addition, the paper reviews published reports to determine the contribution of ITB to economic and social well-being of the students who attended. ITB was an Institute of Technology (IoT) and was comparable to other IoTs around the country. Comparison is made with other HEIs in the Greater Dublin area to compare and contrast the contribution of ITB with other HEIs in this region in the achievement of national higher education objectives such as increasing access and improved employability.

1.1 The Benefits of Higher Education

The benefits of higher education can be categorized across two main headings; these are the returns to the individual, and to wider society (Chan, 2016). Furthermore, these returns can then be split into market and non-market benefits (Hermannsson et al., 2017). The original model by Hermannsson suggests that some of the non-market benefits include issues such as higher life expectancy, lower crime, democratization and increased civic engagement. We believe that it would be difficult to test for these and as such have been left out of the table. On the other hand, a wider of benefits were identified in the literature such as upskilling, developing soft skills, greater participation by non-traditional students, tackling inequality, positive parental influence and social mobility. Therefore, it can be suggested that the Hermansson et al.'s model is a baseline instrument on which to hang the research. Table 1 outlines the key benefits of higher education as outlined in the literature.

The graduate premium refers to the expected higher lifetime earnings that a college graduate can expect to have when compared to a non-graduate. For example, it is estimated that in Ireland the average lifetime earnings for graduates are substantially higher than non-graduates (Indecon, 2019). Other research supports the belief that graduates earn more than those who are non-graduates (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Daly & Bengali, 2014; OECD, 2020). Research shows that graduates are less likely to suffer from unemployment and are more likely to regain employment compared to non-graduates (CSO, 2019; Hout, 2012; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

Table 1: The benefits of higher education for students/graduates

	Private	Wider society
Market	Graduate premium Higher level of employment Soft skills	Upskilling
Non-market	Well-being	Greater participation by non-traditional students Tackling inequality and disadvantage Positive role of parental influence Social mobility

Source: Adapted from Hermansson et al. (2017) and amended by authors.

The decline of traditional jobs in manufacturing has affected those with the least education. Furthermore, the impact of technology has increased the demand for people with higher levels of education (Hill & Ybarra, 2014; Krueger, 1993). These employees require new skills such as creativity, social and emotional skills (Berger & Frey, 2015; Bialik & Fadel, 2018). In addition, the literature suggests that HEIs need to develop a range of soft skills such as communications (including public speaking) (Campbell & Larson, 2013); teamwork (Sweeney et al., 2008); and perseverance (Meriac et al., 2015). The development of these soft skills increases students' success and earning capacity (Campos-Vazquez, 2018; Kautz et al., 2014).

HEIs also contribute to their local and national economies through higher salaries for graduates, their research outputs, overseas students, and direct, indirect, and induced impacts of HEI expenditure (NEF Consulting, 2013; Zhang et al., 2017). In 2017/2018 this was estimated to be worth €8.9 billion to the Irish economy (Indecon, 2019).

As higher education has expanded globally, governments are increasingly concerned with increasing participation rates from non-traditional students as a way of tackling inequality and social disadvantage. Non-traditional students include those from poorer backgrounds, mature students, students with disabilities, and students from ethnic backgrounds (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 2012; Higher Education Authority, 2018; Reed et al., 2015). In addition, research suggests these students from non-traditional backgrounds gain more from their

college education than more traditional students do (Brand & Xie, 2010; Maurin & McNally, 2008; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Thus, HEIs have a crucial role to play in promoting social mobility which is echoed here (p.561) '*Universities were really the ones that were able to equalize our silver spoon or wooden spoon*' (Hensley et al., 2013). Figures from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) and Eurostat suggest that the level of parental education has a major influence on the level of education attained by their children (CSO (2016), Eurostat (2016), Murray (2009). It is also argued that access to higher education also leads to more contented lives (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013), and that higher education contributes to better health (OECD, 2016).

Interventions such a pre-college transition programme, although needing further investigation, have been shown to be efficacious for both students, and their parents, who described such a programme as a means to 'see' their young person becoming a student (Doyle, Gleeson & Treanor, 2017). Notwithstanding the anxiety that commencing third level education may present, it should be noted that the completion of a third level programme has been associated with positive and optimistic feelings. In a qualitative exploration by Vincent (2019), young people described feeling '*ready to go into the world*' and a '*mix of feeling quite sad to leave but excited*'. Such experiences highlight the need to continue to develop and bolster efforts to support young neurodiverse individuals to both enter and complete higher education.

2. Methodology.

In determining the benefits of ITB to its students and graduates, the researchers used a mixed method approach in combining qualitative and quantitative research. This approach is deemed to provide a better understanding of research problems as it provides findings which come from different paradigms (Kidder & Fine, 1987). In addition, the research design allowed the researchers to collaborate and converge by utilising different data sources, substantiate findings and uses results to inform and develop the research findings (Denzin, 1988; Greene et al., 1989). Thus, in an attempt to capture the depth and breadth of the research questions, a combination of desk research along with interviews was used.

The desk research facilitated an analysis of graduate pay and employment rates through the

graduate outcome survey (statistical data obtained from TU Dublin – Blanchardstown Career Office). This data set gave an insight into the earnings of graduates and their contribution to the economy. The paper also examined published reports from The Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). These reports gave information on how Higher Education Institutes perform across a range of criteria. Such large and rich data sets allowed the researchers to complement the primary research component of the study.

Ethical clearance was given in line with institute policy. The interviews were with current students and graduates (35 of the 36 interviewees were Business students or graduates). This research used semi-structured interviews, which were either in a face-to-face setting or by telephone, allowing the participants to provide insights and experiences in a freer non-structured environment. A number of graduates identified via LinkedIn contacts agreed to participate in the research, and then a snowballing technique identified further participants. The current students identified were final year degree students as their experiences and their assessment on the value of their qualification were likely to be insightful to the research study. In total 10 students and 26 graduates participated in this phase of the research. Prior to the commencement of this research, the researchers conducted pilot interviews with two graduates. Following on from these pilot interviews, minor changes were made to the research instrument.

The results of the interviews are not differentiated between graduate and student as the findings were very similar. On collecting the data from these interviews, thematic analysis was the chosen methodology for analysing the results, as it aims to find themes from the collective responses gathered from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a tool that analyses, organises, and reports themes from the data that has been collected. This allows different perspectives and greater insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). The themes identified through careful reading of the interview transcripts were as follows: opportunity for education, the first person to go to college, future children to go to college, job opportunities, practicality in terms of key skills being developed which their chances of gaining meaningful employment, and personal achievement. Upon review, it became clear that all participants followed the same general thematic structure and so it was not necessary to separate graduate and current students for analysis purposes.

3. Findings

As outlined above in the methodology, the findings are based on a mixed methods approach using an analysis of published reports to highlight the graduate premium and publicly available data on the performance of HEIs in Ireland including ITB, and interviews with students and graduates of the campus. This discussion on the findings is framed around the four pillars of benefits outlined in the literature review above and summarised in Table 1.

3.1 Private/Market Benefits

As outlined in Table 1 above, these were the graduate premium, higher levels of employment and the development of soft skills which can enhance employability. As outlined above, it is expected graduates earn more than non-graduates do over their lifetime. Data on ITB graduates' earnings (2018) were obtained from the Graduate Outcomes Survey that is conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Two hundred and one students completed the survey and the average salary was a weighted average based on the salary level indicated by the graduates in their first year after graduation. In addition, salary data for the previous three years was reviewed to ensure that the salary figures calculated are in line with salary levels from previous years. The minimum wage was based on an hourly rate of €9.55, which was in place in 2018 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2022)ⁱ. The difference between the average salary and the minimum wage was calculated and this gives the estimated graduate premium (HESA, 2023). The total number of graduates in each cohort was then multiplied by this difference, and this gives an estimated graduate premium of €5,719,780. This equates to an average of €11,440 per graduate. Full details are outlined in Table 2.

In relation to employment levels of graduates, the HEA collects data from graduates to gain an insight into employment levels and other relevant graduate data in the "Graduate Outcomes Survey Class of 2018" report. This report revealed that the full-time employment levels for graduates of ITB was 77%, which compares well to the employment level for all the HEIs surveyed in 2018. Full details can be seen in Table 3.

Table 2: Estimated Graduate Premium Calculations (compiled by authors based on Graduate Earnings 2018).

Cohort	Average salary*	Minimum wage	Graduate premium	No. graduates	Estimated total premium
Applied Social care	29,667	19,864	9,803	31	303,893
Business	27,333	19,864	7,469	85	634,865
Computing	36,429	19,864	16,565	207	3,428,955
Creative Digital Media	26,111	19,864	6,247	23	143,681
Early Childhood Education	25,391	19,864	5,527	70	386,890
Engineering	40,882	19,864	21,018	23	483,414
Horticulture	22,000	19,864	2,136	10	21,360
Social & Community Development	24,526	19,864	4,662	11	52,282
Sports Management & Coaching	26,500	19,864	6,636	40	265,440
Total				500	5,719,780

*Average salary is based on the 201 respondents to the graduate outcomes survey.

Table 3: Employment levels (compiled by authors based on HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey Class of 2018)

HEI	Full time employment %	Full time study
Dublin City University	69	17
Maynooth University	56	24
Trinity College Dublin	67	22
University College Dublin	57	29
National College of Art & Design	56	10
Dublin Institute of Technology	79	6
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design, and Technology	64	4
IT Blanchardstown	77	4
IT Tallaght	75	15

The importance of the development of soft skills in improving employability was outlined above and the participants stated that their degree programme played a key role in developing areas such as confidence, multitasking, communication and presentation skills, self-awareness, conflict resolution, problem solving, group and team building, and public speaking.

“I think for me it’s given me a lot of confidence. I hated secondary school and my leaving certificate was atrocious, so it was actually through work I did my first accountancy courseand I’m doing well so it gave me a lot of confidence in that way”.

For another participant, their degree gave them the confidence to apply for promotion.

“Yes absolutely since doing that degree program I’ve been promoted since now the degree program wasn’t necessarily for my promotion but it certainly gave me more confidence going for promotion...”

Many participants explained that before coming to ITB they found public speaking extremely daunting. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that there had been a strategic emphasis on public speaking within the course structures, which proved very beneficial to students.

“I’m pushed outside of my comfort zone quite a lot in terms of speaking to large groups of people which I think prior to me going to college would have been very dauntingI think if I hadn’t got that groundwork with college it would be a very different experience”.

In addition, classwork, and teamwork interactions facilitated the development of communications skills on a daily basis on campus. Another soft skill gained was through regular presentations. The interviewees highlighted the strong focus on presentations in the course content.

“We had a lot of different presentations as part of assessments within ITB which gave a great skillset I suppose to be able to get up and speak and it’s something I did just there recently in work”.

For some participants, presentation skills developed throughout the course helped overcome a reticence to express their view due to their cultural background. A number of participants from migrant backgrounds explained that their culture did not encourage them to share opinions in an outspoken fashion and thus presenting in front of a group of people was something they would naturally try to avoid. However, after some time on campus, they developed this skill, and it became less daunting.

“In terms of soft skills because of where I came from, we are not outspoken, it’s a kind of culture to us but getting over here there is more to going to college and being able to speak for yourself and being able to stand in front of a crowd and say something.....To get out of my comfort zone and do what was expected of me and it actually has helped me a lot in my personal and professional life as well”.

In relation to team building and group work, the opportunities to work with diverse groups and cultures allowed students to develop greater understanding of different perspectives within their group settings.

"For me, one of the most important skills is people skills my ITB education has helped me deal with conflict ...focusing a lot on group work presentations and group work. But I say it was the best experience it made me a better person".

Working with groups has helped to prepare them for the workforce, as teamwork is a critical part of the work environment.

"I learned by going to college that there's no getting around the fact that you have to work with people. So, I suppose there's no job you're stuck in a cubicle forever just working on your own all the time. You always have to interact with somebody, your boss or someone but you still have to talk to someone".

Therefore, the discussion above suggests that many of the soft skills outlined here were critical in helping students to transition into the workforce.

3.2 Wider Society/Market Benefits

In terms of upskilling, the researchers took the number of mature students entering third level as a percentage of the total number of new entrants (full time undergraduates). The figures for all Dublin-based HEIs for seven years (2011/12 to 2017/18, on 1/1/2019 ITB became part of the new TU Dublin) are set out in Table 4. The table shows that ITB had 22% of its student intake were mature students. The average for all of the Dublin-based HEIs listed in Table 4 below is just under 10%.

Table 4: Mature students as a percentage of new entrants (full time undergraduates).

HEI	New entrants – full time undergraduates 2011-2018	Mature entrants	%
Dublin Institute of Technology	25,377	2,983	12
Institute of Technology Tallaght	5,936	785	13
Trinity College Dublin	21,094	1,934	9
Dublin City University	19,697	1,514	8
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown	5,486	1,192	22
University College Dublin	30,275	2,199	7
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design, and technology	3,993	423	11
National College of Art and Design	1,732	203	12
Total	113,590	11,233	10

Source: compiled by authors from the Higher Education System Performance and sectoral profiles from 2011/12 to 2017/18 published by the Higher Education Authority

3.3 Wider Society/Non-market

The wider society/non-market benefits are mainly in the provision of greater opportunities for education. The analysis revealed that the theme of opportunity for education played a role in areas such as providing opportunities to mature students (as outlined above), more attainable entry qualifications and the accommodating nature of entry requirements.

A majority of participants identified themselves as the first generation in their family to attend/graduate college. These participants explained that their parents or siblings did not attend college prior to their completion of the degree program. Some spoke about their parents or siblings' lack of opportunity to attend college as highlighted by the participant below.

"I am very proud to say I'm the first of thirteen in my family to go to college".

Many participants emphasized the importance of taking advantage of educational opportunities for their children or future children. These participants valued education and the opportunities it could generate for their future. Some participants used words such as "crucial" and "very important" when outlining their views on this matter.

"It's absolutely crucial for my children to go to college".

A small portion of participants within the analysis pointed out that they were immigrants and they were pursuing higher education in Ireland to carve out a more fruitful future for their children.

Motivation to pursue higher education was another factor that emerged within the context of this theme. A small portion of participants explained that by completing this level of education it motivated the people around them to undertake a course or in the case of young children showing them that a degree is attainable.

"Yes, it's very important for my children I had all my children before coming to ITB, so they were so excited especially the day I graduated..... It actually motivates them, and they are all looking forward to their opportunity".

In terms of providing educational opportunity to a wider range of students, the researchers looked at HEA statistics on the backgrounds of new entrants into the Dublin based HEIs. The HEA publishes data on the number of students from a non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled background. Table 5 shows that ITB had 37% of its intake of students from a lower socio-economic background. The average for all of the Dublin-based HEIs was 21%. This would suggest that ITB helped to tackle inequality and disadvantage, while increasing social mobility.

Table 5: Students from non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic backgrounds as a % of new entrants (full time undergraduates).

HEI	New entrants – full time undergraduates 2011-2018	Number of students from a non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled background	%
Dublin Institute of Technology	25,377	6,109	24
Institute of Technology, Tallaght	5,936	1,928	32
Trinity College Dublin	21,094	2,951	14
Dublin City University	19,697	4,791	24
Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown	5,486	2,040	37
University College Dublin	30,275	4,952	16
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology	3,993	1,002	25
National College of Art and Design	1,732	359	21
Total	113,590	24,132	21

Source: compiled by authors from the Higher Education System Performance and sectoral profiles from 2011/12 to 2017/18 published by the Higher Education Authority

3.4 Private/ Non-market Benefits

The key consideration in the private/non-market benefits relates to improved well-being of the student. Although no direct questions were included in the questionnaire, the above findings do allude to the better quality of life. This can be demonstrated through the graduate premium earned by the graduates, the confidence obtained as shown in the soft skills obtained which helped the graduates in their workplace and made them better placed to gain promotions and enhanced job opportunities available to them as a graduate.

In summary therefore, the benefits of higher education are evident in all four quadrants in relation to the amended Hermansson et al (2017) model discussed above.

4. Discussion

Given the large amount of public funds spent by HEIs in Ireland, it is appropriate that there is accountability for this spending. Policy makers and the public must be assured that the monies are spent in accordance with public sector guidelines, and that the spending is efficient and effective. New Public Management (NPM) depicts one approach, and this requires HEIs to demonstrate their effectiveness in terms such as graduate employment and the impact of their research through measurable metrics such as citations. However, critics of NPM suggest that this reduces HEIs to little more than job training centres and does not appreciate the wider role of higher education as a public good. Therefore, a public value approach to higher education requires HEIs to be evaluated in terms of their contribution to the economic and social well-being of their stakeholders. Hermansson et al. (2017) argue that the benefits of higher education can be split into those for which there is a market value and those for which there is no market value; and then each of these can be split into those, which are obtained by an individual, and those, which accrue to wider society. These elements are outlined in Table 1 above.

This research used a mix of interviews with students and graduates along with publicly available documents. The research examined the contribution of the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (now part of Technological University Dublin) to one of the main stakeholders – students/graduates.

The research findings are based on interviews with 36 students/graduates and desk research. While almost all the interviewees were business students/graduates, there is no reason to believe that the experience of graduate/students in other disciplines would be any different. In relation to the private/market benefits, the research shows that ITB graduates are earning on average of €11,440 above the minimum wage and this is the estimated graduate premium. In addition, Blanchardstown graduates have employment levels at 77%, which compares well with employment levels (at 75%) for graduates from other HEIs in Ireland as outlined in Table 2. In relation to wider society/market benefits, Blanchardstown graduates and students outlined the wide range of soft skills that they developed as part of their course. These included the strong emphasis on presentations, which improved their communications skills, and their confidence regarding public speaking; group work, which increased their ability to work as part of a team

which many, saw as a key ingredient in preparing them for entry into the workforce. In relation to upskilling, HEA statistics show that Blanchardstown had a higher proportion of mature students than other Dublin-based HEIs. Table 4 above shows that on average during the period 2011 to 2018, 22% of ITB's new entrants were mature. This compares to an average of 10% for all the Dublin-based HEIs outlined in Table 4 above.

Regarding the wider society/non-market benefits, the interviews suggested that ITB provided them with an opportunity for higher education. For many, they were the first in their family to go to a HEI. For others, it was an opportunity to increase their skills set as new immigrants in the country. For those graduates/students with children, the interviews suggested that they were determined that their own children would go on to higher education. The HEA statistics presented in Table 4 above also suggested that ITB was providing educational opportunity to a wider range of students from lower socio-economic categories. Such an approach is a key part of government strategy in tackling inequality and disadvantage and improving social mobility.

In relation to private non-market benefits, while there were no specific questions asked during the interviews, it can be suggested from the discussion above that the well-being of the students/graduates had been improved. Graduates were earning more, had learned critical soft skills which had increased their confidence, and they had enhanced job opportunities.

It is to be hoped that the new Technological Universities will continue to meet the needs of a wide range of students by offering greater access to higher education while meeting their other objectives. The public value lens provides a more holistic frame for examining the contribution of HEIs to public policy. It increases the parameters on which higher education can be assessed in an attempt to place a clearer, more concise and more realistic value on higher education from an individual and wider societal perspective.

Such a wider lens approach will therefore form a key strategic input into the public policy debate and formulation stages and reflect a wider range of stakeholders, in terms of the benefits accrued from higher education in Ireland. In addition, it will help secure future funding as it demonstrates the true value of higher education in tackling wider societal issues than is currently

attributed to higher education. Furthermore, it will increase the strategic importance of higher education in the development of a fairer and more equitable society.

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