

## **International league tables and rankings in higher education An appraisal<sup>[1]</sup>**

Kathleen Lynch  
UCD Equality Studies Centre, School of Social Justice  
University College Dublin

### **The public interest role of the universities**

Universities have marketed themselves in the public sphere and justified public funding for their activities on the grounds that they serve the public good. They have traded on their Enlightenment inheritance that they are the guardians and creators of knowledge produced for the greater good of humanity in its entirety. They are seen and claim to be seen as the watchdogs for the free interchange of ideas in a democratic society; they claim to work to protect freedom of thought, including the freedom to dissent from prevailing orthodoxies. They are quintessentially defined as public interest institutions and their research is granted status and credibility on the basis of its disinterestedness (De La Fuente 2002; Lieberwitz 2004).

Over the last decade however, universities have been transformed increasingly into powerful consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged (Rutherford 2005). To what extent universities honoured their public interest inheritance in the past, even prior to the takeover by neo-liberal market values, is, moreover, debateable. Years of research evidence on the patterns of class inequality in education have shown that not only has there been little class mobility in education over the last 50 years (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Clancy 1988, 1995, 2001; Archer *et al.* 2002), there is little hope of social mobility through education for many even in prosperous countries like the USA (Gamoran 2001). Universities have been embedded with professional interests in different countries, servicing those interests well from a functional perspective, but often doing little to challenge the evident social closure practices within powerful professional groups. They have been party to forming the professional class of the welfare states (where such states existed) (Hanlon 2000). Professional associations (in medicine, dentistry, law, pharmacy, psychology, veterinary science, and so on) have exercised considerable control over university education, specifying hours of professional practice, staff–student ratios and course content, in a manner that has more often been endorsed than challenged by the academic world. In my own university I have watched with interest over the last 20 years as professional groups put pressure on the university to resource courses and reduce student intake in their fields for the expressed purposes of maintaining standards. The need to have courses validated by international professional associations is always cited as the reason for reducing numbers and increasing resources. The indirect effect of this in a financially constrained environment has been to control student intake, making it more competitive and selective. This is highly advantageous to the profession given the logic of supply and demand in a market-led economy. However, it also has profoundly inegalitarian effects as it increases the cost of services due to a reduced supply of professionals in certain fields. It also alters the social profile of the student intake as higher academic entry standards strongly favour the socially advantaged. A series of national studies of entrants to higher education in Ireland spanning almost 20 years shows that students entering the professional faculties of law, dentistry,

medicine and veterinary science have been drawn disproportionately from the middle and upper middle classes (Clancy 1988, 1995, 2001). The response of the universities to extensive criticism of these developments has been both slow and limited in its impact. In certain respects, what is happening now in the universities is that they are being asked to produce commercially oriented professionals rather than public interest professionals (Hanlon 2000). While this may seem like merely a change in form rather than substance, the danger with this advancing marketised individualism is that it will further weaken public interest values among those who are university educated. Yet a welfare-oriented democratic state depends on the realisation of such values to provide services on a universal basis. Without adherence to such values, the only basis on which services will be provided is on the ability to pay.

In their internal operations too, the history of universities shows that they have been both hierarchical and patriarchal (Bagilhole 1993; Morley 1999; Hey 2001; Saunderson 2002; Reay 2004). Certainly, it is hard to argue that universities were models of enlightened organisational practices even prior to the emergence of the endorsement of neo-liberal values. While there have been critical voices in higher education, critical of its pedagogy and its exclusivity, it is also true that they have been minority voices, often working against the tide even in the pre-neo-liberal days. So the cry of the academy that its public interest functions are being undermined by the neo-liberal agenda can ring hollow to those who have lived for generations without the privilege of higher education.

The vision of the university as a place for the education of the elite and for elite education has had a powerful historical precedent in Plato's Academy. To what extent the Platonic view of education still dominates our thinking about the role and purposes of the universities is arguable (Harkavy 2005). Certainly the focus of his interest, the realisation of aristocratic order, has been superseded by history, not least because of the successful democratisation and universalisation of education itself. What has come to pass is the growing commercialisation of higher education although this is not entirely a late twentieth- or twenty-first-century phenomenon. It is the pace and intensity of commercialisation that has been exacerbated. During the Second World War, and particularly during the Cold War years, the sciences in particular became more openly and deliberately commercial especially in the USA (Bok 2003). Reforms implemented in Britain after the Robbins report in 1963 also altered working conditions for academics in that jurisdiction as the proportion of staff employed directly by the universities declined throughout the 1970s (Halsey 1992; Henkel 1997). In Ireland, the centralisation of power and control allowed for under the Universities Act 1997 has come to fruition within the last two years with a radical restructuring of the universities along corporatist lines. This has been especially evident in the three largest universities (University College Dublin (UCD), University College Cork (UCC) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD)) although the two newer universities University of Limerick (UL) and Dublin City University (DCU) were constituted in the early 1990s as highly centrally controlled institutions.<sup>[2]</sup> What is new about the commercialisation of university education in the twenty-first century is its moral legitimacy. Commercialisation is normalised and its operational values and purposes have been encoded in the systems of all types of universities (Steier 2003).

### **Neo-liberalism and its implications**

The corporatisation and marketisation of the universities has its origins in neo-liberal politics premised on the assumption that the market can replace the democratic state as the primary producer of cultural logic and value.<sup>[3]</sup> Those who endorse a neo-liberalism position, including Chubb and Moe (1990) and Tooley (2000), favour a market view of citizenship that is generally antithetical to rights, especially to state-guaranteed rights in education. The citizen is defined as an economic maximiser, governed by self-interest. There is a glorification of the ‘consumer citizen’ construed as willing, resourced and capable of making market-led choices. In this new market state, the individual (rather than the nation) is held responsible for her or his own well-being. The state’s role is one of facilitator and enabler of the consumer and market-led citizen (Rutherford 2005). This neo-liberal position is fundamentally Hobbesian in character, focusing on creating privatised citizens who care primarily for themselves. The privatised, consumer-led citizenry of the neo-liberal model are reared on a culture of insecurity that induces anxiety, competition, and indifference to those more vulnerable than themselves (Harvey 2005).

When transposed to education the neo-liberal model of citizenship has very serious implications (Giroux 2002). It treats education as just another service to be delivered on the market to those who can afford to buy it. The rationalisation that is offered is that it provides people with choice. Choice is the carrot with which people are duped into believing that they will have freedom to buy what higher education they like in some brave new market. This drive to increase ‘choice’ and shift control from the school or university to the sovereign consumer is indicative of a broader political shift towards the right. A distinctive neo-liberal interpretation of fairness and efficiency based on the moral might and supremacy of the market has taken root internationally (Apple 2001; Bonal 2003; Loxley and Thomas 2001; Thrupp 2001). And small countries like Ireland are no exception to this trend (Allen 2003; Kirby 2002; Lynch and Moran 2006).

Yet, the evidence is overwhelming that in economically unequal societies, only those with sufficient resources can make choices and those who are poor have no choices at all (Archer *et al.* 2003; Ball 2003; Gewirtz *et al.* 1995; Lauder *et al.* 1999; Lyons *et al.* 2003; Reay and Lucey 2003; Whitty *et al.* 1998). What is ignored is the fact that what people may want is not a choice of university (or public service) but access to an affordable, accessible and available university education of high standard (Tight 2000). For those with limited resources, choice is a secondary rather than primary value, taking its place behind quality, affordability and access (Lynch and O’Riordan 1998).

### **The liberal inheritance**

Neo-liberalism has a history. It has inherited the core values of liberalism in both its humanistic and economic forms. It shares with the classical liberalism, a humanist tradition that defines the person as an autonomous and rational being, a Cartesian *man sic* whose humanity is encapsulated in the phrase ‘Cogito ergo sum’ (I think therefore I am). As such, it carries through into the twenty-first century a deep indifference to the inevitable dependencies and interdependencies that are endemic to the human condition (Nussbaum 1997). It is disregarding of the role that emotions play in our relationships and our learning, and correlatively indifferent to the central role of care

and love relations in defining who we are (Baker *et al.* 2004; Lynch and Baker 2005). In line with *classical economic* views of education, it also defines the person to be educated in economic terms, as '*homo economicus*' a labour market actor whose life and purposes are determined by their economic status. These twin sets of values are reinforced with a third set of educational purposes, namely the conceptualisation of the person to be educated as a highly individualised, self regarding and consuming economic actor. Competitive individualism is no longer seen as an amoral necessity but rather as a desirable and necessary attribute for a constantly reinventing entrepreneur (Apple 2001; Ball 2003). What neo-liberalism has succeeded in doing, however, which classical liberalism did not do, is to subordinate and trivialise education that has no market value.

The moral opprobrium that has been accorded to the definition of the educated person as one who is autonomous, rational, market-oriented, consuming and self-interested has profound implications for the operation of education as a social practice. It is indifferent to the fact that the majority of citizens in society at any given time are not self-financing consumers (children, older people, unpaid carers, and so on). Many are in no position to make active consumer choices due to the poverty of their resources, time and/or capacities. In line with its classical origins, the neo-liberal perspective also jettisons from educational formation much of the work and living concerns of humanity. It is disregarding of the fact that while we are undoubtedly economic actors, consumers and rational actors, neither our rationality nor our economic and consumer choices can be presumed to be devoid of relationality. For most of humanity, much of life is lived in a state of profound and deep interdependency and, for some, prolonged dependency (Kittay 1999). Humanity may be characterised as *homo sapiens* or *homo economicus* but we are also undoubtedly '*homo interdependicus*' and at times '*homo dependicus*'.

The neo-liberal model is also indifferent to the fact that the state is an ineliminable agent in matters of justice. It ignores the reality that only the state can guarantee to individual persons the right to education. If the state absolves itself of the responsibility to educate, rights become more contingent – contingent on the ability to pay. What is at issue here is the difference between democratic accountability and market accountability. In a market-led system access to higher educational services will be contingent on market capacity or the ability to pay, whereas in a democratic, publicly controlled system, one's right to education is protected (however minimally at times) by the state.

The irony of what is now happening is that it is the very success of state-aided education that is used to challenge its continuance. The massification of higher education in Western countries has produced cultures and societies that have benefited greatly from the enrichment of their cultural capital (and their standards of living) through state investment in education. However, to maintain this level of social and economic development that derives from high quality higher education requires continual investment by the state. With the rise of the new-right, neo-liberal agenda, there is an attempt to offload the cost of education, and indeed other public services such as housing, transport, care services, and so on, onto the individual. There is an increasing attempt to privatise public services, including higher education, so that citizens will have to buy them at market value rather than have them provided

by the state (Angus 2004; Bullen *et al.* 2004; Steier 2003; Stevenson 1999). The move to marketise and privatise manifests itself in different ways in higher education.

### **Making markets of higher education**

With the decline in the value of manufacturing industry in terms of investment returns, and the rise of the value of the services sector in both scale and profitability, there is an ongoing movement to define education as a tradeable service worldwide. The pressure to move education from a public service to a tradeable service is very much part of the ideology of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) agreement the purpose of which is to liberalise all service in all sectors of the economy globally (Robertson *et al.* 2002). So far the EU has resisted the opening up of sectors such as health and education to such trading but these sectors are now being threatened by the Bolkestein Directive. One of the aims of this Directive (named after its proposer, the Dutch EU Commissioner Frits Bolkestein) is to make all services in Europe open to market competition. While it was voted down in the European Parliament in February 2005, it has returned to the political agenda of the EU after the voting down of the EU Constitution in both France and the Netherlands.

The reasons for wanting to make education a tradeable service are quite simple. In 2000 UNESCO estimated that education was a \$2 trillion global 'industry'. There is definite potential for profitable returns if such a service can be traded, especially among those sectors of society that can afford to pay for it. This possibility is recognised by the international stockbrokers Merrill Lynch.<sup>[4]</sup> In *The Book of Knowledge* Merrill Lynch define education as a service that presents one of the major new opportunities for investors in profit terms (Moe *et al.* 1999). The rise of influential and financially endowed social movements in the USA to promote for-profit higher education, (as an example see <http://www.ecs.org>, Callahan 2001 and Covington 2001 for a critique of this trend), and the fact that there are 650 for-profit colleges and universities is a clear indication that for-profit trading in higher education is well underway (Morey 2004). The largest of the for-profit universities, the University of Phoenix in Arizona, has been trading for several years and now has 174,900 students. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly given the profit-orientation of its operations, it has very few tenured faculty staff: there are only 285 full-time faculty, but a sizeable and easily dispensable body (17,000) of adjunct or part-time staff (Morey 2004). The casualisation of the academic and teaching staff is an inevitable correlate of for-profit education.

The move to create markets in education is not limited to the for-profit sector of higher education. There are many ways in which academic capitalism is fostered through the funding of research (patenting) and in ancillary services associated with college entry such as tutoring and test preparation (Lynch and Moran 2006). There are also school chains operating as businesses not only in the USA but also in a number of South American and countries and in Europe. Commercial sponsorship of school services in return for the guaranteed use of commercially sponsored materials is widespread, as is the privatising of support services in schools and colleges, and the creation of internal markets within colleges. The move to allow schools to become mini companies and to take over other schools under the UK Education Act (2002) is another manifestation of the influence of the market practices in education.

The move to create global league tables for universities is symbolically the most powerful indicator that market values have been incorporated into the university sector. What is significant is that this ranking has been undertaken by commercial operations (newspapers in a number of cases), and universities themselves have little control over their operation. There are commercial rankings for a number of years in the USA, Australia, Canada and the UK (Dill and Soo 2005). While some ranking systems can and do take into account official evaluations such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Teaching Quality Assurance (TQA) rating in the UK, the rankings are far from systematic and scientific (Tight 2000). Commercial rankings or League Tables exist not only within countries, they have also started to operate between countries. The most famous of these global rankings is that undertaken by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In 2003 and again in 2004, the technological university focused heavily on engineering sciences developed a ranking system for evaluating universities worldwide in terms of their relevance to their postgraduate and research needs. The criteria by which they evaluated the top 500 universities are listed in the Table 1.

*Table 1*

*Shanghai Jiao Tong (China) world ranking\* of universities*

10%	Nobel laureates among graduates (chemistry, physics, medicine, economics and Fields Medals in maths) 5 subjects only
20%	Nobel laureates awarded to current staff in above five areas
20%	articles in two science-related journals Nature and Science
20%	highly cited** researchers in 21 areas (all 21 subject areas bar one, and part of another, are in science or technology)
20%	articles in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index (many of the prestigious journals in the social sciences are not listed)
10%	overall academic performance: weighted scores on the above five indices divided by full-time equivalent academic staff members
100%	TOTAL

Notes

\* Only published articles are included. No book publications are included

\*\* The basis on which the HCI index works within the social sciences and education fields is difficult to establish. I checked to see if a number of well-known European social science scholars were on the HCI index and none of them are listed as highly cited in the index including such famous scholars as Pierre Bourdieu, John Rawls and Judith Butler

Despite the narrowness and selectivity of the Jiao Tong ranking scheme, in particular its neglect of student learning experiences and its blatant bias against the

arts and humanities and most of the social sciences, it has been widely cited as providing a legitimate evaluation of universities.<sup>[5]</sup> The *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* has initiated a similar index and this is riven with even more biases and arbitrary evaluations. The *THES* index is in breach of the most basic scientific principle: access to the methodology employed is not published in detail. See Table 2.

*Table 2*

*UK Times Higher Education Supplement Index (2006)*

40%	of grade is based on a 'peer review exercise' by QS – Quacquarelli Symonds a commercial body – 'they contacted 3,703 academics around the world' and asked them to name their top 30 universities in their fields [ <i>How these were sampled, counted or weighted is not stated.</i> ]
10%	based on graduate 'international recruiters' (736) [ <i>Who these are and why they were chosen is not stated.</i> ]
20%	for staff student ratio: dividing student numbers by staff numbers – 'staff who have a regular contractual relationship' [ <i>Who knows what is counted here. It is not stated in the methodology.</i> ]
20%	for citations measured by Thompson Scientific in Philadelphia and divided by staff numbers [ <i>Only journal articles are counted.</i> ]
5%	for the percentage of overseas staff [ <i>The rationale for this is unclear.</i> ]
5%	for the percentage of overseas students [ <i>The rationale for this is unclear.</i> ]
100%	TOTAL

What is evident from both these developments is the fact that there is now a clear international attempt to develop a League Table of World Universities.

Despite their proliferation, however, league tables direct us away from many of the core values that are central to University work, including quality teaching, outreach, inclusion and research which is of worth not only to our careers but to humanity in its entirety. They focus higher education attention on a narrow set of internal market considerations, particularly on what can be measured (Taylor 2001). None of the so-called league tables focus on the quality of student experiences, none of them assess universities in terms of their inclusivity and respect for diversity. They strongly discourage us from focusing on access as they are fundamentally about ensuring that universities become even more elite in their orientation (Tight 2000; Dill and Soo 2005).

To date the formation of the evaluation scheme for the appraisal of the universities has been generally outside of the control of European universities. It has been especially outside the control of those working in the arts, humanities and social sciences as their work is clearly not defined as central to the national development agenda of agencies such as the OECD. The attitude of the OECD to the arts,

humanities and social science is evident from the OECD review of higher education in Ireland in 2004 (OECD 2004). Throughout the report on Irish higher education the focus is on developing a *skilled work force for the economy*. There is no reference in the body of the report to the role of the universities in developing the civil, political, social or cultural institutions of society, either locally or globally. Interestingly, the terms of reference for the OECD group do make reference to the importance of identifying strategies for developing skills and research needs ‘for economic and social development’ but there is no reference to these objectives in the published report.

### **The implications of marketisation**

That there is a major global movement to change the nature of the university’s role in society is beyond doubt (Angus 2004; Bullen *et al.* 2004; Rutherford 2005). It is a movement that was heralded in the early 1990s when the World Bank published its report titled *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (2004) that promoted the idea of developing private universities, private funding for higher education, and public funding for universities subject to performance. While many working in Western and Northern universities took little notice of such a proposal, assuming it to apply to African and other poorer countries, it was a portent of what was to come for all universities.

What is notable about the change is that the university is being pressurised to change from being ‘a centre of learning to being a business organisation with productivity targets ... to transfer its allegiance from the *academic* to the *operational*’ (my italics) (Doring 2002: 140 citing McNair 1997). As the operational has encoded within itself many of the values of the commercial, adopting a purely ‘operational focus’, or treating change as a purely ‘technical problem’, means that the values of the commercial sector can be encoded in the hearts of the university systems and processes almost without reflection. The move from the academic to the operational does not happen in the name of serving commercial interests or values in all countries or at all times, although it seems to have happened in this way in the UK (Rutherford 2005). Sometimes it is explicit, as in the development of joint ventures and conferences between business and the universities<sup>[6]</sup> but other times it comes in the name of efficiency, productivity and excellence. The Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation (2004) on *Building Ireland’s Knowledge Economy* exemplifies such a trend. The Report is prominently displayed in the Irish Universities Association website (see <http://www.iaa.ie>), under the Links with Industry section. In the section on ‘Realising the Vision’, the report outlines the actions for the Public Research System (effectively the universities and other higher educational institutions) as being to: (v) ‘Develop a national plan to increase the performance, productivity and efficiency in the higher education and public sectors’ and (vi) ‘to sustain Ireland’s commitment to building an international reputation for research excellence’. Throughout the report the development of society is equated with economic development and the latter is focused primarily on science and technology. In my own university, UCD, the Inaugural Foundation address of the new President outlining his vision for the university demonstrates a similar tendency to define excellence and performance as values in and of themselves, regardless of for what purposes excellence is achieved or how it is achieved. He called for UCD to be:



A research-intensive university where bold and imaginative educational programmes and excellence in teaching go hand-in-glove with a commitment to the discovery process, research and innovation; a university that is shaping agendas nationally – supporting where appropriate and challenging where warranted; a university that is truly international and truly Irish; a university where excellence is the benchmark for everything that we do, whether it be teaching, research or administration.

(Dr Hugh Brady, UCD President, Inaugural Foundation Day Address, Friday 4 November 2004, UCD O'Reilly Hall)

There is a relatively silent colonisation of the hearts and minds of academics and students happening in universities. Such a colonisation is made possible by the seemingly apolitical nature of the neo-liberal agenda; it depoliticises debates about education by hiding its ideological underpinnings in a language of economic efficiency (Giroux 2002). The changes are significant not only in terms of how they refocus research and teaching efforts in the university but also in terms of how they change the cultural life of the university. Not only is constant auditing and measuring a recipe for self-display and the fabrication of image over substance, it also leads to a type of Orwellian surveillance of one's everyday work by the university institution that is paralleled in one's personal life with a reflexive surveillance of the self. One is always measuring oneself up or down (Leathwood 2005). Everything one does must be measured and counted and only the measurable matters. Trust in professional integrity and peer regulation has been replaced by performance indicators. There is a deep alienation in the experience of constantly living to perform. It leads to feelings of personal inauthenticity within a culture of compliance. Externally controlled performance indicators are the constant point of reference for one's work regardless of how meaningless they might be (Cooper cited in Rutherford 2005). Rewarding staff on a measurable item-by-item performance basis will inevitably lead to a situation where personal career interests will entirely govern academic life. It will mean that the measure of educational and research worth is increasingly one's ability to serve the market.

While many can and do resist the aforesaid changes through personal and collective actions, the power and speed of change can make resistances seem futile and ritualistic.<sup>[7]</sup> The allegations against those who resist change are also inevitable; they are accused of blocking progress, of being anti-reform, of being university luddites who do not realise what the brave new world of the market has to offer. As there are opportunities in the market for commercialised professionals and academics (Hanlon 2000) internal division between staff in the universities is inevitable and open to exploitation by management. The power of the allegation of being opposed to 'innovation' means that the important difference between the positively innovative (in our own university opening up to undergraduates the opportunity to take options each year outside their main degree programme is an obvious case in point), the genuinely destructive (only rewarding staff for what can be easily measured) and the purely self serving (opposing student evaluation of courses on the part of tenured staff, or management paying large salary increases to those who are co-opted to positions of authority while at the same time seeking redundancies among low paid restaurant staff on cost grounds as has happened in UCD) is never made public. The conflict becomes polarised and the loss of what has been of value in the university is hidden behind the loss of the inessential.

The culture shift does not apply only to staff. Students' lives are also directed increasingly to economic self-interest and credential acquisition. Student and staff idealism to work in the service of humanity is seriously diminished as universities operate as entrepreneurial, purely competitive business-oriented corporations (Elton 2000). As Harkavy has observed 'When Universities openly and increasingly pursue commercialisation, it powerfully legitimises and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest by students and contributes to the widespread sense among them that they are in college solely to gain career skills and credentials' (Harkavy 2005: 15).

A further consequence of uninterrogated marketisation is the gradual elision of the divide between the commercial and the scholarly in the research field. The merging of commerce and research is presented as both desirable and necessary and university policies are increasingly directed towards rewarding such links. The rhetoric of accelerating costs is used to drive the industry–university links agenda as the neo-liberal state attempts to extricate itself from the cost of publicly funded higher education.<sup>[8]</sup> While the University has both a need and a responsibility to work with a wide range of public and private sector interests, as a public institution the interests and values of the for-profit sector cannot drive its research. University scholarship is of its nature critical and reflexive. It is founded on the assumptions of independence and autonomy. Quite understandably, the ethical principles and priorities of the business sector are not synonymous with those of a public interest body, such as a university (Eisenberg 1987). If universities become too reliant on industry-funded research, or too beholden to the business-driven agenda of the government of today (even if it comes coded in the guise of advancing science), there is a danger that the interests of the university become synonymous with powerful vested interests. This will undermine the purposes of the university as an enlightenment institution serving the good of humanity in its entirety. It will also undermine the very independence of thought that is the trademark of university research (Blumenthal 2002; Lieberwitz 2004). It will compromise public trust in the scholarly integrity of university research and teaching. The university will become, and be seen to become, the handmaiden of a set of powerful sectoral interests. There is evidence that this is happening already in sensitive areas such as food production, genetics, biotechnology and environmental protection (Monbiot 2000).

### **Marketisation and the threat to critical voices**

Another issue that must be addressed with moves towards the market is the threat marketisation poses to the very existence of critique and creativity itself. If universities are dependent increasingly on contract research, this will leave little time to develop the critical and creative conceptual frameworks that follow after contracts are finished. In contract research, there is little time to bring out articles when the project is in progress so there are layers of silencing, and indeed of exploitation, built into the whole process.<sup>[9]</sup>

Making the universities market-oriented also greatly weakens the position of the arts, humanities and critical social sciences as most research and teaching in these fields does not service the for-profit sector directly; their remit is to educate for the public sphere, for civil society and not for profit. Research in East Germany shows that when universities were restructured after unification, the departments that were

most often closed in the technical universities were those involving critical social scientific disciplines, multidisciplinary programmes and women's studies programmes (Bultmann cited in Stevenson 1999). The closure of the highly successful but also strongly critical Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and Sociology Department in the University of Birmingham in 2002 is further proof of the fact that there is a serious threat to critical thought in a more marketised higher educational system (Webster 2004).

While the social sciences and critical programmes are not being closed down in Ireland, they are gradually losing status and influence as the state recedes from maintaining investment in the arts, humanities and social sciences at a rate that is remotely comparable to the physical sciences.<sup>[10]</sup> Without state investments such fields cannot flourish, as there is no serious alternative to government funding. Profit-oriented businesses have no short-term stake in funding critical theory, sociology, community development, critical social policy, cultural studies, equality studies, disability studies, adult education or women's studies, not least because such fields of research and theory are often critical of the values and operational systems of profit-driven interests. So if the state recedes from higher education investment in new professorships and academic posts in the arts and human sciences, or invests at a very low level in critical disciplines, there is a gradual shrinking of these sectors of higher education by default if not by design. There is ample anecdotal evidence that this is happening already in Irish universities. In UCD the Chair of Equality Studies and the Chair of Disability Studies are the only two endowed professorships in the College of Humanities to be funded from outside sources (funded by philanthropic bodies and a statutory agency) in the last five years. There have been no endowments for professorships in the arts and humanities in that period while there has been a large number of endowed chairs in the College of Life Sciences and the College of Physical Sciences and Mathematics most of which are commercially funded.

Making the universities strongly market-oriented will lead also to a concentration of resources in universities outside of public control. In the USA, for example, public universities are finding it increasingly difficult to attract successful researchers and academics as they cannot offer the same salaries as private institutions (Smallwood 2001). There is challenging evidence too that increased elitism does not produce better learning or scholars. A distinction has been drawn between the 'Prestige' status of a university and what Brewer *et al.* (2002) call the 'Reputation' status. While prestige colleges may emphasise the highly selective profile of their student and staff intake there is evidence that this may not translate into quality education. A study of 26 private and public universities and colleges in the USA by Rand (Brewer *et al.* 2002) suggests that competition for prestige does not seem to improve the quality of educational delivery, while it can lead to investment in building research facilities with high maintenance and matching funds costs without clear benefits for students or society more generally.

### **Regulation and counting**

One of the other serious challenges faced in the university is the regulation of publications, lectures and engagements according to a narrowly defined set of market principles. While it is self evident that peer review is vital for scholarly advancement, confining the academic voice to peer review has serious consequences for the

democratisation of learning and for the dissemination of research in more publicly accessible forums. The reason is obvious. Once academics are only assessed and rewarded for communicating with other academics that is all they will do. In a research assessment system where one is rewarded for publishing in peer-reviewed books and journals, there is little incentive to invest in teaching, even the teaching which is part of one's job (Taylor 2001). The incentive to teach or disseminate findings in the public sphere through public lectures, dialogues or partnerships with relevant civil society or statutory bodies (including professional bodies representing teachers and other educational workers) is negligible. There is a strange irony in the fact that a lecture given to a professional body such as head teachers involving several hundred people (600 in my own case in the autumn of 2005) or a publication of one's lecture for that body is not counted as a relevant academic event, whereas a seminar to one's peers where ten or twenty people (or less may attend) does count as an academic exercise (my experience at several academic conferences) and the subsequent paper is counted no matter how specialised, small or self-selecting the peer audience may be.

There are growing disincentives therefore to being a public intellectual, to share ideas with publics in one's own society, outside the universities, to engage in public debate in newspapers, popular books or the media. While this may be the norm from the perspective of the academy, it shows how the university systematically devalues dialogue with persons and bodies other than academics. It effectively privatises learning among those who are paid-up members of the academic community be it as students or academics. The lack of dialogue with publics, apart from one's peers, not only privatises knowledge to closed groups, it also forecloses the opportunity to have hypotheses tested or challenged from an experiential standpoint. It limits the opportunities for learning that occur when there is a dialogue between experiential and theoretical knowledge.

A further dimension to the regulatory practice of peer review is the way academics are penalised for publishing in their own language or in their own country journals. The system in the University of Oslo is an interesting example. Academics are given 1,000 Norwegian kroner for publishing an article in a Norwegian journal (i.e., in Norwegian in Norway); they are given 7,000 kroner for publishing an article in English outside of Norway. This not only threatens the scholarly vibrancy of the Norwegian language, it also strongly encourages academics to dialogue primarily with specialist academics outside their own country (Brock-Utne 2005). Academics need to publish in their own countries and in their own languages, especially in fields like the humanities and social sciences where so much of what needs to be understood is local as well as global. For this to happen such work needs to be rewarded not sanctioned.

When there is no 'peer review' value in engaging in public debate, there is no incentive to engage in the public sphere, to challenge ill-informed absolutisms and orthodoxies. In effect there is no incentive to publicly dissent or engage within the very institutions that are charged with the task of dissent and engagement. The reward system of academic life means that the 'good' academic is encouraged to become a locally silent academic in their own country, silent in the public sphere and silent by virtue of dialoguing only with academic peers outside one's own country.

The assumption is that Irish (Finnish, Latvian, Danish, Slovenian, Maltese or other similar small country) academics will become global players and that their global profile will indirectly lead to the dissemination of their ideas in the public sphere through internationalisation. To make this kind of impact, scholars, would need to be competing in a system where there is equality of condition as there can be no *equality of competition* without *equality of condition*. Such is not the case in the higher education sector. The control of global commercial publishing is centred in the major cities of the powerful capitalist states in the world. It is naive to expect the majority of academics from minority cultures and languages to dominate the higher education market where they are minnows in competitive terms. While there are isolated exceptions, at the corporate level, powerful universities with big budgets can and do provide the best opportunities for globalisation of ideas, not least because of their massive financial reserves (reportedly several billion in the case of Harvard, see Lieberwitz 2004) and their central location within the global publishing markets (Smallwood 2001). This is not to say that scholars from other countries do not produce excellent research or publish successfully, rather it is to face the competitive global reality that those who have most resources are likely to be most successful.

One of the unforeseen negative consequences of relying on peer-reviewed systems to disseminate research knowledge is that academics will become increasingly invisible to the people who pay their salaries, and that is the taxpayers for those who work in predominantly state-funded university systems. Even if we have no interest in democratising research relations, or in being public intellectuals, there is a simple political reality that taxpayers are unlikely to fund universities if they cease to engage in a visible and accessible way with the big public issues of our time, be these housing problems, the integration of the new immigrant communities, environmental issues or protecting the rights of disabled people. Maintaining an ongoing engagement with both professional and community partners in education is an ongoing remit not only for education departments but also for faculties and schools whose research and teaching has immediate relevance outside of the university setting. If academics cease to engage they will cease to inform; they will also engender their own demise by their invisibility in the non-academic public sphere.

### **Finding a voice: sites of resistance**

In most European countries there is a long history of democratic struggle over education, including university education. Consequently the discourses on university education are not singular. While the neo-liberal code is dominant, there are alternative narratives, narratives of equality and inclusion that challenge the prevailing orthodoxies. These narratives are part of the official EU rhetoric and are given expression in various treaties and directives. Albeit subordinated, such discourses provide opportunities for challenging the market-driven agenda. They provide spaces for resistances and opportunities for redefining the purposes of the university.

In Ireland, for example, there is a growing political demand to promote diversity in the university body, not only in terms of the socio-economic profile of students, but also in terms of their age, ethnicity, disability and citizenship status (HEA 2005). The Irish Universities Association recognises the importance of being inclusive and lists ‘Widening Participation’ as one of its core objectives. The

European University Association, representing 30 National Rectors' Conferences and 537 individual European universities, in the *Gratz Declaration* signed in Leuven in July 2003, has strongly stated its objections and concerns regarding the operation of the GATS (General Agreement in Trade and Services) in relation to higher education. It outlines as a basic principle the fact that 'Higher Education exists to serve the public interest and is not a "commodity", a fact which WTO Member States recognised through UNESCO and other international and multilateral bodies, conventions and declarations'. It goes on to endorse UNESCO's 1998 *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century* and states that

The mission of higher education is to contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of society as a whole by: educating highly qualified graduates able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity; advancing, creating and disseminating knowledge through research; interpreting, preserving and promoting cultures in the context of cultural pluralism and diversity; providing opportunities for higher learning throughout life; contributing to the development and improvement of education at all levels; and protecting and enhancing civil society by training young people in values which form the basis of democratic citizenship and by providing critical and detached perspectives in the discussion of strategic choices facing societies.

([http://www.eua.be/en/policy/global\\_GATS](http://www.eua.be/en/policy/global_GATS))

There is a growing recognition too that there is a contradiction between pursuing a business-oriented and privatised approach to university education and promoting access for disadvantaged students. This is most clearly seen in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics where there were no private third-level institutions in the early 1990s but now there are several hundred. The evidence from Eastern Europe including Russia is that privatisation has a negative impact on equality in terms of student intake, not least because of the absence of an adequate system of financial supports (Steier 2003). As noted by Steier (writing within a World Bank context) 'increased institutional choice for students is meaningful only for those who can afford to pay tuition at private institutions or for those with access to financial aid' (Steier 2003: 163).

It is clear from the above, that maintaining diversity in intake is a key policy objective if universities are to implement the Gratz Declaration and the UNESCO Declaration that they have signed up to. They cannot adopt market norms that will undermine their duty to educate all sectors of society. It is our duty and our opportunity to hold our universities to account in terms of these agreements.

Rather than being bewildered and overwhelmed by neo-liberal rhetoric we need to build a counter-hegemonic discourse, a discourse that is grounded in the principles of democracy and equality that are at the heart of the public education tradition. We need to reinvigorate our vision of the university as a place for universal learning and for challenging received orthodoxies. The work of Paulo Freire (1972), the great Brazilian educator of adults, offers such a challenge even though it would move us far from whence we came in terms of university education as it would require us to recognise the importance of mutuality in learning, the importance of creating a dialogue between student and teacher, between researchers and those being

researched. It is a challenge to democratise the social relations of teaching, learning and research production and exchange, a challenge that many traditional university educators may well not feel comfortable with. Yet the question is: Do we have much choice if we are to create new visions for our universities? If we have regard for the public service purposes of the university, for our responsibility to educate all members of society and educate them for all activities in society, including non-commercial activities be it in the arts, in politics, in caring work or in public service work itself, then we must radically alter the ways in which we define university education. We need to create allies for public education in the civil society sphere and in the public sector sphere so that the public interest values of the universities can be preserved. As noted elsewhere, such a move would radically alter the way we educate and the way we do research (Lynch 1999a).

## **Conclusion**

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us. (Morrison 2001)

Public universities were established to promote independence of intellectual thought, to enable scholars to work outside the control of powerful vested interest groups. Scholars are artists of the intellect, granted the freedom from necessity to write and research on the presumption that they do so in a manner that is disinterested in the purest sense of that term. It is widely understood and assumed that academic independence and objectivity is the guarantor of the public interests; it is expected that university scientists and scholars equate their self-interest, in research terms, with the public interest. While the public know that research conducted by profit-driven operations and powerful interests within the government and the state often is subject to political interpretation, in line with the interests of the funders, it is assumed, rightly, that this does not happen in the university.

There is therefore a widespread public trust and belief that the university employs scholars whose task it is to undertake research and teach for the public good. There is a hope and expectation that those who are given the freedom to think, research and write will work for the good of humanity in its entirety. Consequently, university research has been funded by the public purse for the greater part, even in countries such as the USA. It is estimated that between 70 and 80 per cent of funding for university life sciences research in the USA is public funding (Blumenthal 2002).

Because the university is designed to serve the weakest and most vulnerable in society as well as powerful economic interests, it has a major responsibility to inform and vivify the work of the public sector, and the voluntary, community and care sectors, both locally and globally. It is the lynchpin of civil society, laying the intellectual foundations for cultural, political, affective, ethical and social life, as much as for economic life. It is vital for the university sector to create alliances therefore with those sectors of society that share its core values and public service purposes.

Unless the university plays a central role in building the civil infrastructures of society by advancing thinking in cognate fields, economic developments in the future will be in jeopardy. The civil, public and care infrastructure of society is the lifeblood that courses through the veins of economic development. It is the civil, public and care institutions that drive the heart of the body public. They ensure that the services, resources and understandings that are vital for change and development are renewed and reinvigorated on an ongoing basis.

Instead of yielding to the pressures to simply service the market, and to import its values and methods unquestioningly into higher education, universities both collectively and individually are in a powerful position to challenge the new neo-liberal orthodoxies. Academics have the space and the capability to work collaboratively to create strong alliances and networks not only among themselves but also with the entire civil society sector whose interests are so central to the public interest, and whom the universities have a duty to serve.

The university operates in a complex cultural location in many respects. It is at the one time a product of cultural practice and a creator of culture; it is a powerful interest and a creator of interests. There is a sense in which its intellectual independence is always at risk, given its reliance on external funding from many sources, and yet its history grants it the capability to reclaim its own independence (Delanty 2001). To maintain its independence, the university needs to declare its distance from powerful interest groups, be these statutory, professional or commercial. It must not only do this rhetorically but also constitutionally. Maintaining a critical distance from the institutions of power in society is vital if one is to protect the public interest role of the university.

As Europe has become increasingly dependent on higher education to drive the social, political, cultural and economic infrastructure of society, access to higher education is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for survival. We also need to challenge the neo-liberal agenda in education, not least because higher education is increasingly a necessity for the majority rather than a privilege for the few.



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## Notes

1 This paper was presented to the *Colloque International: Mutations de l'enseignement supérieur: influences internationales* given at the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale (ULCO), Boulogne-sur-Mer, 20–22 November 2006.

2 There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland, five of which have origins in the nineteenth century or prior to that period (University College Dublin (UCD), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland (NUIG), National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)) and two of which were formerly Institutes of Higher Education and were constituted as universities in the last 20 years (University of Limerick (UL) and Dublin City University (DCU)). Ireland has largely retained a binary higher education system with the Colleges of Technology remaining a separate sector governed by separate legislation.

3 To say that the neo-liberal perspective glorifies the market and denigrates the state is not to deny the need that markets have for strong legislative and regulatory protections to protect commercial interests and legitimate market practices (Olssen 1996; Apple 2001). However, if international institutions (such as the European Union) and agreements (such as the General Agreement on Trade and Services) can override state actors in determining the regulatory environment for capitalist interests then the role of the nation state is compromised in terms of its regulatory powers. While major capitalist states can and do exercise influence over the international regulatory environment for capitalism, the role of small states is severely limited. The observation by economists that Ireland is one of the most 'open economies' in the world is merely a euphemism for stating that, as a nation state, Ireland (and similarly small states) has very little control over the global trading environment in which it has to operate.

4 Merrill Lynch are a US based Global Financial Management company with offices in 36 countries.

5 *The Irish Times* (widely regarded as the most prestigious daily newspaper in Ireland) cited the rankings of the Jiao Tong league tables on multiple occasions throughout 2004, especially after the publication of the OECD Report on Higher Education in Ireland in the same year. The ranking of Irish universities was treated unproblematically and the limitations of the ranking system were not analysed in any depth. It also cited the rankings of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* rankings, again very unquestioningly.

6 The joint conference of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) 'Careering Towards the Knowledge Society: *Are Business & Academia Geared up to Provide a Future for High Level Researchers in Ireland?*' (30 November 2005 The Helix, DCU, Dublin 9) is an example of the new kind of alliance the universities are developing with business interests. In the research field the links are well established and the Intel, 4th Level Ventures and the CRANN project are examples of this trend. Science Foundation Ireland (funded by the Irish taxpayer) has contributed €10 million to a new Centre for Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET) entitled the Centre for Research on

Adaptive Nanostructures and Nanodevices (CRANN) in TCD, with partners in UCD and UCC (announced Jan 2004). Intel Ireland is CRANN's main industry partner; it located four Intel staff members to CRANN where they have a five-year contract as researchers-in-residence at a cost of €2.9 million to Intel. While the collaboration is identified by TCD Provost John Hegarty as one which will help push TCD to the forefront of worldwide innovative research (*Trinity Online Gazette*), Intel is quite explicit about the corporate interests served by the partnership:

By building technical leadership and research capability in Intel Ireland staff, CRANN allows Intel Ireland to add value to its existing operations while also demonstrating strategic value to Intel Corporation. CRANN enables Intel Ireland to explore niche scientific research in Ireland, which will allow the company to look towards Ireland for future Intel research initiatives.

(<http://www.intel.com/ireland/about/pressroom/2004/january/011204ir.htm>)

7 Throughout 2004 and early 2005 UCD went through a wide range of changes in its statutes and structures. The number of Faculties were reduced from 11 to 5 (now called Colleges) while Departments were reduced in number from over 90 to 35. Statute 6, governing the day-to-day operations of the university, was radically altered centralising power increasingly in the President and his close associates. Staff challenged and resisted many of these changes, particularly those that appear to erode the limited democratic controls that they had in the university. They held meetings with and without their trade unions, organised lectures and directly challenged the plans at Faculties, Academic Council and the Governing Authority. However, as time wore on it was clear that changes the so-called 'President's Team' proposed were going to be passed regardless of protests and concerns. Consultations with staff increasingly developed a meaningless ritualistic character as changes in structures were pushed through (with some very minor concessions) regardless of dissent.

8 What is often forgotten in these discussions is that the claim by the state of inability to pay for education is not new. In the Irish case, it has been part of the history of all public education from the mid nineteenth century when the cost of primary education was regarded as too great for the rate payers (Coolahan 1981). More recently when free public secondary education was introduced in the 1960s there was an outcry that Ireland could not afford free secondary education for all students (Coolahan 1981). The same arguments are merely repeated now about higher education.

9 Reay (2004) notes that the 'research team' is a euphemism that operates to conceal the true hierarchical and often exploitative relations within the so-called teams. It operates to ensure compliance by concealing the true hierarchies of power, status, income and control that operate within it. Contract researchers are often out of contract by the time papers are written often leaving them with no publication record in return for their work (Hey 2001).

10 The budget for Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), that funds the physical sciences, engineering and related mathematical areas, has increased dramatically in the last 5 years. SFI is now a multi-million euro operation with individual research programmes over €10 million being strongly promoted. The funding for research in humanities, arts and social sciences has remained relatively static with the entire



budget for research in the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) being less than that available for single projects in the sciences and engineering areas. (Source: direct communications with SFI and the IRCHSS and published materials from both.)