

Irish Times Article

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Ireland faces a university challenge

Our continued economic success requires a clear strategy to improve the quality of the country's third- and fourth-level education, writes **David Duffy**.

There is now an increased focus on education and the value it can contribute to the social and economic development of a country. Following efforts by third-level sector leadership, the economic link between investment in education and our ability to move up the value curve is now rightly recognised by the Government.

However, as a country, we have some way to go. According to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (October 2006), Trinity College Dublin (at number 78) is the only Irish university in the world top 200 university rankings. In 2006, five other Irish institutions made it on to the top 500 universities list. This group included Dublin Institute of Technology, UCD, UCC, DCU and NUI Galway.

While these places may seem relatively low, Ireland can take some comfort in the response that Germany gave to the ranking. The Germans argued that the role of universities is to produce trained professionals in large numbers for an advanced economy and that; as a result, many competent universities were to be preferred to a few elite institutions.

This notwithstanding, the Top 500 World University Ranking 2006 (compiled by the Institute of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University) also evidenced similar low-level rankings for Ireland's universities. Ireland's three places on the list were made up by Trinity, UCD and UCC, with rankings in the ranges 201-300, 301-400 and 401-500 respectively. This is in marked contrast to the US, which is dominant in both rankings, something which can be clearly attributed to their understanding of the link between a vibrant and well-funded third- and fourth-level sector and a successful economy.

To improve our standing, there are many challenges. Central to these are the creation of a stronger link between enterprise and third-level education. The Global Competitiveness Report 2003-2004 ranked Ireland in 30th place, down from 11th place in 2001. The strength of innovation and technology transfer was a key indicator in determining a country's position on the index. To survive or thrive, institutions will have to make hard choices that lead to selected areas of excellence that position them favourably in a competitive marketplace.

In addition, the education budget is under severe pressure from competing demands elsewhere in the public sector. Critically, Ireland's expenditure on education is below the OECD average. The economic and fiscal realities facing Ireland's third level mean that relying on State funding alone will be insufficient. To sustain our future economic prosperity, we need to reflect on what role we see education playing in our lives and how we should plan for it.

In the southern hemisphere, for example, the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy 2002-2007 proposed a blueprint to enhance performance in the education sector. These strategies centred on the need to strengthen the overall capability and quality of the system, while increasing participation in and understanding of the knowledge economy across all social strata. This focus on creating both supply and demand, as it were, presents clear parallels for Ireland as we become a more diverse society.

Member of Eurogroup Consulting Alliance



Education has been identified as a sector to nurture and support because of its value to the economy and export earnings potential. While the economic potential of the education sector has been recognised, it would be fair to say that socio-political concerns in Ireland have limited efforts to promote the sector and develop education as a business. A key factor is the fact that third-level education is almost exclusively run and funded by the State, with the private colleges that do exist lacking the size and resources to make a significant impact.

We can see from other economies that education can represent a significant service export. In Australia, education is the country's fourth-biggest export earner, worth in the region of 5.6 billion Australian dollars to the economy in 2003-2004. (Source: *Education without Borders: International Trade in Education September 2005*.)

In 2005, the education workgroup chaired by the deputy dean of the INSEAD business school, Prof Arnoud de Meyer, compiled a report, *Developing Singapore's Education Industry*, which analysed the higher education system in Singapore and provided a vision and key recommendations for the development of the sector. There are obvious parallels between the Irish and Singaporean economies: both are small knowledge-based economies; both see a close neighbour with a large slice of the international education market (UK and Australia); and both are regional hubs for multinational companies.

There are a number of key lessons for Ireland from the Singapore experience. First, we must develop a culture and reputation of education excellence. In Singapore, this was achieved through attracting eight top internationally recognised universities to establish campuses in the country.

Second, we must encourage the development of corporate training and executive education. Singapore has actively encouraged multinationals (of which there are over 6,000, many with regional responsibilities) to anchor their regional training centres there.

And third, it is imperative that we establish an education promotion agency, along the lines of the British Council and the US Education Centre, to attract staff and students to the host country.

This is not to say that investment in third- and fourth-level education in Ireland is not taking place. Our Government is currently investing large sums of money in this area, which is to be applauded. However, a weakness in this endeavour is that there is no clear strategic context for this investment.

While each university rightly has an ambition to move up the world rankings, we need to think at a higher level, with a broader, macro-level aim.

We must consider what distinct and unique strategy could accelerate not only the individual rankings of each university but also the positioning of Ireland as a country.

In order to achieve this aim, it is essential that a coherent strategy is put in place to provide much-needed guidance for the future. This strategy should be explicit, connected and future-focused as it directly contributes to broad national, economic and social goals. Furthermore, it must be given time to allow its benefits to materialise.

Consequently, a strategic planning process needs to be initiated now. If not, there is a genuine danger that we will lose out on the real long-term benefit of current investment in Irish education.

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