

Chapter 46

New Knowledge – New Learning?

Curriculum Change in Higher Education and Academic Engagement in the Bologna Process in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of university undergraduate and postgraduate education in Ireland has undergone a significant change within the broader context of the Bologna Process in Europe. In recent years, a range of national steering initiatives have sought to promote curriculum reform, enhancement of teaching and learning, use of new learning technology, new forms of student support, and professional development of academic staff. The aim of this chapter is to analyse both underlying challenges and some significant achievements. The latter include examples of collaborative initiatives between academics and centres for academic practice and student learning in universities and joint projects across an alliance involving eight institutions of higher education. The authors also talk about the drivers of curriculum reform in higher education and illustrate how these are translated in practice through the introduction of a major curriculum reform initiative, the Academic Framework for Innovation (AFI) in one university.

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning strategy of higher education in Ireland is rooted in the history and culture of its universities and other institutions of higher education. However, it is also strongly connected to the current social and economic environment. To set briefly the context for our discussion, we highlight a number of important factors which underpin the changes which have taken place across the sector of higher education over the past decade, and which act as major drivers of curriculum reform. In the last decade higher education in Ireland, as in many other developed countries, has become increasingly linked to a policy agenda associated with economic and social development. In particular, higher education is expected to play a central role in the development of the 'knowledge economy' and/or 'knowledge society' (Expert Skills 2008; Department for Education and Skills 2011; Slowey 2012):

Ireland's higher education system has played a major role in the development of Irish society and economy and has an even more critical role to play in the coming decades as we seek to rebuild an innovative knowledge-based economy that will provide sustainable employment opportunities and good standards of living for all our citizens. Its role in enabling every citizen to realise their full potential and in generating new ideas through research are and will be the foundation for wider developments in society (Department of Education and Skills 2011: 11).

In this context, there is an increasing expectation that the curriculum of higher education should become more 'responsive' to society's needs, addressing social and economic challenges and preparing graduates who are resourceful, inquiring, creative and innovative. The National Strategy for Higher Education makes the case that a high quality student experience should not only provide graduates with a comprehensive understanding

of their relevant disciplines, but also equip them 'with essential foundation skills as adaptive creative, rounded thinkers and citizens' which in turn has major implications for the nature of the curriculum, teaching and learning (Department of Education and Skills 2011: 13).

Three other important drivers for curriculum reform are: first, increasing levels of participation in higher education - the Irish system is approaching mass levels of participation as, by 2011, the proportion of school leavers progressing to further study is in the region of 60%; second, widening participation and increasing social inclusion which is more generally underpinned by the universal notions of social justice (Higher Education Authority, 2009); and third, developments in the area of communication and information technology which have broader implications for higher education delivery, resulting in knowledge being more dynamic and widely accessible. In the latter context, new opportunities have arisen for institutions to incorporate e-learning into the mainstream core curriculum, as well as offering programmes on a distance/blended basis.

Reflecting on the above it can be argued that curriculum reform in universities is currently underpinned by an interplay of global, national and institutional factors. More specifically, the chapter goes on to talk about the experience of Ireland in its engagement with the Bologna Process. Dublin is a capital city of Ireland and the Dublin city-region accounts for approximately half of all higher education provision of the country. Therefore, we talk about the experience of the Dublin city-region in the higher education institutional reform process. Some examples of how aforementioned challenges are translated into some curriculum developments of this city-region will be provided in a greater detail below.

As such, that is in this context this chapter explores the recent experience of the Republic of Ireland and, the Dublin city-region in particular, in relation to three recent interrelated developments.

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