CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Providing a pluralist environment: the challenge to the third level institutions
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	1998-03-12;1998-03-12
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (1998) 'Providing a pluralist environment: the challenge to the third level institutions', Conference on Access to Higher Education organised by the Standing Conference for North/South Co-Operation in Further and Higher Education. Malahide, Dublin, 12 March 1998, pp. 1-7.
Type of publication	Conference item
Rights	© 1998, Áine Hyland.
Download date	2026-11-03 02:34:26
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17762



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Providing a Pluralist Environment: The Challenge to the Third Level Institutions

Paper delivered by Áine Hyland,
Education Department, University College Cork
to the Conference on *Access to Higher Education*
organised by the Standing Conference for
North/South Co-Operation in
Further and Higher Education in Malahide
12 March, 1998

I am very pleased to make a short contribution to this Conference. Much of what I had planned to say has already been said by previous speakers. Yesterday's presentation by Professors Patrick Clancy and Robert Osborne provided an overview of past and future participation rates in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and attempted to assess the impact of Government policies North and South on participation. The presentation by Dr. Don Thornhill, Chairman of the HEA in the Republic, and by the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council addressed issues relating to opportunities for and obstacles to success. The feedback from workshop rapporteurs this morning, which I chaired, indicated the depth and breadth with which various issues were explored by the different groups and it was interesting to hear similar issues emerging from the different groups. The need for recognition of qualifications and for a national qualifications framework body which would take on board cross border questions was highlighted as being of prime importance. The need for greater flexibility in transferring both within and across institutions was also referred to. Immediate issues facing students who attend higher education institutions across the North/South divide were highlighted in a most

articulate way by the four students who spoke to us in the last session. Their experience on the ground must provide an important basis from which future policies and decisions will emerge. In the short time available to me this morning I will touch on issues which challenge third level institutions in relation to the provision of a pluralist environment. These will include issues relating to religion, gender, socio-economic background, access and flexibility.

A pluralist society is a society which respects the culture and beliefs of the different groups and individuals within it. Pluralism is a marked feature of modern western societies which manifests itself in virtually all aspects of life - politics, religion, law, morality, economics, and culture. In refraining from installing any one idea of the good life as ideal, it creates not only tolerance but also a productive interaction between people with different ideas and experiences that allows full range to the essentially questing nature of the human spirit.[1]

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of recognising pluralism as a key principle in the provision of education. Speaking in February, 1996, the then Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, stated as follows:[2]

> "The importance of instilling an inclusive pluralism perspective in ourselves, in our children and in our societies cannot in my view be overstated. Too often, we have witnessed the evil harvest of intolerance; of bigotry; of wilful failure to understand one another's concerns, and we must take a shared democratic approach to resolving them".

The question of religious pluralism within higher education has not generally speaking been an issue in either the North or the South in recent years. This contrasts with the situation at primary and second level both North and South where religiously

segregated schools continue to be the norm. In general one might ask the question as to whether religious diversity is best catered for within one institution or within a diversity of institutions? As I thought of this question I realised that what has by and large now come to be accepted as the norm in higher education, i.e. religiously integrated provision, is a recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1960s higher education, particularly in the South, was religiously segregated. The history of Irish education, particularly in the nineteenth century, resonates with controversy and conflict in relation to the provision of university education for Catholics[3]. The setting up of the National University in 1908 finally broke the log jam but for over sixty years university education was religiously segregated. It is of interest to remind ourselves that developments since the late 60s in higher education both North and South contributed to a more pluralist environment within most of our higher education institutions. A number of factors contributed to this, one of which, ironically, was the points system of selection which refocused selection criteria from the traditional religion/school attended at second level to the sole criteria of academic performance. One of the unintended outcomes of this selection system would appear to be a more religiously mixed student population in both Universities and Institutes of Technology. The only area where the legacy of religious segregation remains is in the structure and enrolment of the Colleges of Education both North and South. One might ask whether this segregation should continue into the twenty-first century but that is a question for another day.

A pluralist environment within higher education institutions should as far as possible be inclusive in gender terms. We are all aware of imbalances by gender in some

faculties and subject areas and despite a number of initiatives focused on redressing the imbalance, problems still exist. This is particularly true in areas such as engineering and computer studies which tend to be male-dominated and in the social sciences and education which tend to be female-dominated. One of the more glaring areas of imbalance relates to the staffing of higher education. In 1993/94 only four percent of Professors in Universities were women whereas at the junior level of Assistant Lecturer thirty-nine percent of staff were female. The overall proportion of academic staff who were women in 1993/94 was twenty percent.[4] This severe under-representation of women in senior positions in Universities has been highlighted on a number of occasions in the past fifteen to twenty years. Some improvement has occurred in the decade from 1983 to 1993 but much still remains to be done in this area.

Previous speakers have focused on what is probably the most serious imbalance in higher education both North and South, i.e. the socio-economic imbalance of participation. Professor Clancy yesterday provided stark data on the situation in the South and again while some improvement has been shown in participation figures in the past decade, we still have a long way to go. Questions must be raised where a situation prevails that ninety percent of the children of higher professional families enter higher education whereas only sixteen percent of the children of semi-skilled manual workers do so.[5] It is generally accepted today that measures to counter-balance this situation must begin very early on in a child's life. Initiatives have been put in place from pre-school education onwards to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Other measures which have been introduced in recent

years include support at primary and second level in remedial education, in home-school-community support, in providing additional resources for schools in designated disadvantaged areas, etc. Nevertheless, the situation continues whereby up to 1,000 young people leave school at the end of primary education; 3,000 leave with no qualification whatsoever from second level schools; a further 7,500 leave with Junior Certificate only and a further 2,500 leave before completing senior cycle.[6] In the longer term early school leavers are a drain on the exchequer. Seventy-five percent of families in poverty are headed by an adult who has no educational qualification. An adult with no educational qualification is nine times more likely to be poor than someone with third level education.[7] Investment in education is now recognised to pay dividends. Higher levels of educational attainment are clearly associated for individuals with higher earnings, lower chances of unemployment and more skills that yield advantages to people as consumers and active citizens.[8] In this regard it is important to note that in relation to a child who left school at the end of primary school, the state has only spent £11,400 on that child. At the other end of the scale, the state will have spent almost £38,000 on a young person who completed a four year programme at third level[9] (since these are 1995 figures, and since University fees have been abolished since then, the latter figure is now likely to be much higher).

Speaking recently, the Provost of Trinity College, Tom Mitchell, has pointed out that fewer than 350 out of the 50,000 University students in the Republic of Ireland come from disadvantaged backgrounds. He concluded:[10]

> "It is a situation that raises fundamental questions of social justice; it is a blot on our affluent society, and it contains the seeds of social alienation and disruption and lawlessness".

The issue of access and flexibility has been addressed by previous speakers and I would like to add my voice to those who expressed concern at the rigidity of the system in the Republic of Ireland and its implications. The fact that so few of our students at higher education are of mature years (only in the region of three percent) would appear to contribute to the 'now or never' mentality of school leavers and the hype associated with Leaving Certificate results and the offer of higher education places. If a greater proportion of places were made available for mature student entry and for students seeking access through alternative routes e.g. via Post Leaving Certificate courses and NCEA certified diploma courses, then it might well be that young people would feel less pressured in their final school years. I accept that there are difficulties currently surrounding the question of mature student entry, particularly issues relating to comparability of qualifications and experience. The development of a national qualifications framework would go a long way to addressing this issue. The willingness of higher education institutions to adopt a credit transfer system will also be of significance.

Other speakers have discussed the question of targeted and focused support for students with disability and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Various initiatives have been introduced by higher education institutions to support such students and these initiatives have been financially targeted by special funding by the HEA and the Department of Education and Science. At the moment, however, these initiatives are institutionally based and in the case of the latter, i.e. students from disadvantaged backgrounds, places are often tied in with specific second level schools. While these are important in themselves, we must recognise that over sixty

percent of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are in rural areas[11] and are not targeted under any of the existing schemes. As we move into the twenty-first century it is desirable that individual institutional initiatives be evaluated with a view to putting in place a national policy and programme in relation to access to higher education for pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds.

I will conclude with an extract from a talk given by President Mary McAleese with the National University of Ireland in January, 1998:[12]

> "The task for all of us today, is to condition the minds and hearts of this generation, so that they too can pass on a legacy which sees a generous sharing Ireland that encompasses many traditions and cultures; that embraces the disadvantaged in our society; that creates a space for all of its people; and where the richness of diversity is itself a virtue of which we can all be proud".

NTH-STH.ACS
PPRS(3)AH/CB

---

[1] Jim O'Donnell, *Wordgloss*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1990.
[2] Niamh Bhreathnach, "Realities for Schools in 2000 AD:1" in *Pluralism in Education: Conference Proceedings 1996*. Dublin: Pluralism in Education Committee, Dublin City University, 1996.
[3] Á. Hyland and K. Milne, *Irish Education Documents Vol. 1:* Section VI University Education. Dublin: Church of Ireland College, 1987.
[4] Orla Egan (ed.) *Women Staff in Irish Colleges*. Cork: HEEU, September 1996.
[5] *Interim Report of the Steering Committee's Technical Working Group* - Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education. Dublin: HEA, 1995.
[6] National Economic and Social Forum, *Early School Leavers and Youth Unemployment*. Forum Report No. 11. Dublin: NESF, January 1997.
[7] Conference of Religious of Ireland, *Religious Congregations in Irish Education: a role for the future?* Dublin: CORI, 1997.
[8] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Education Policy Analysis 1997*. Paris: OECD, 1997.
[9] CORI, *op. cit.*
[10] Tom Mitchell, *address to USI Conference on Access to Higher Education* in Dublin Castle, March 1998.
[11] Tom Kellaghan et al., *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Education and Combat Poverty Agency, 1995.
[12] Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, *Address to the National University of Ireland*, January 1998.