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Challenges in an Ever-Changing Landscape – the Global and Irish Backdrop to Change

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This chapter attempts to set the scene for the discussion on Leadership which was the theme of the first 3U conference held in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 2 March 2013. The conference was attended by education and health professionals, some of whom were engaged in postgraduate studies. The purpose of the presentation was to identify the key factors which are driving change in the education of professionals in Ireland, especially professionals in the fields of education and health. This is not an academic paper – it is simply a summary of the key points made by the author at the conference.

At the opening of the presentation, the conference participants were reminded that there is nothing new about change. Change has had an impact on the human race since the beginning of civilisation. Sometimes change is evolutionary, sometimes it is a paradigm shift. But, as Patrick Lynch noted in the Preface to *Investment in Education* (1965) 'change is perennial, and will not stop this year or next'.

Philosophers and leaders have written about change and its impact, for over 2,000 years. Heraclitus, writing almost 2,500 years ago said: 'Nothing endures but change'. Three hundred years later, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus wrote: 'The universe is change: our life is what our thoughts make it'. In addition, Machiavelli's famous quotation on change, from his treatise *The Prince*, written in the sixteenth century, is well-known and widely quoted:

> There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries … and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it. (Machiavelli, 2003: Chapter VI)

The knowledge revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries has had major implications for the education of professionals. It is no longer possible (if it ever was) for a health or education professional to learn all he/she needs to know in an undergraduate programme. Professionals need to be aware of the ever-changing and developing nature of knowledge – they need to have an enquiring mind, to have investigative skills, to be researchers in their field. To quote Angela Brew, from an unpublished report of a strategic project on research-enhanced learning and teaching (2008):

> For the students who are the professionals of the future, developing the ability to investigate problems, make judgments on the basis of sound evidence, take decisions on a rational basis, and understand what they are doing and why, is vital. Research and enquiry are not just for those who choose to pursue an academic career. They are central to professional life in the twenty-first century.

In a further statement, Brew adds:

> In a world characterised by supercomplexity, we need, not bodies of pre-defined knowledge, but rather the skills of finding out. Knowledge has become fluid and contestable. In its many domains of discourse, it has become a product of communication and negotiation. The students of the future are going to need the skills of enquiry – or research – if they are to be able to investigate and to learn and hence be employable in the future.

We cannot overestimate the importance of developing a culture of enquiry in all professional learning environments - undergraduate and postgraduate, on campus or online, or in teaching/clinical/pastoral settings. Research- informed and research-led teaching are a *sine qua non* of higher education. Engagement by students in research should be an essential component of professional studies at all levels and a spirit of curiosity and enquiry should permeate their learning environment. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011), otherwise known as the Hunt Report, states: 'Every student should learn in an environment that is informed by research, scholarship and up-to-date practice and knowledge' (National Strategy, 2011: 17). It continues:

> The integration of research with teaching and learning occurs in an environment and in a context where a spirit of enquiry and questioning prevails and where staff and students are committed to an evidence-based approach to their work, and to creating new knowledge as well as to transmitting and critiquing existing knowledge. (54)

The professional leader of the future needs to be, not only an expert in his/her disciplinary field, but also needs to be able to impart that expertise to his/her colleagues. To quote again from the Hunt report:

> It is not sufficient for academics to be experts in their own disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline. They need to have an understanding of learning theories and to know how to apply these theories to their practice. They need to appreciate what teaching and learning approaches work best for different students in different situations. (59)

In terms of ensuring that they help their students to develop enquiry and critical skills, professional leaders need 'to stimulate active, not passive learning, and to encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over' (52-3). They need to 'create a process of active learning by posing problems, challenging student answers, and encouraging them to apply the information and concepts in assigned readings to a variety of new situations' (53).

Professional leaders and good clinical teachers need to demonstrate professional, teaching and personal characteristics. As professionals, they need to possess excellent clinical knowledge, to demonstrate professional competence and to be excellent professional role-models. As teachers, they need to establish a positive learning environment and to have the ability to inspire curiosity and interest in their students. As human beings, they need to have qualities of empathy, personal characteristics of integrity and humility and they need to have high ethical values and an ability to communicate or explain well (Sutkin et al., 2008: 452-466).

There have been significant changes in higher education in Ireland in the past decade, driven by a variety of factors – local, national and international. The increasing requirements of society and the economy for a well-educated workforce, the ever-growing demand (in Ireland) for higher education, both from school-leavers and from the more mature population, the demand for postgraduate qualifications, the globalisation of higher education and greater mobility of students and staff have all been factors in the change process. The growth in demand for higher education is occurring at a time of financial austerity and cutbacks in government spending on higher education, while at the same time tax-payers are demanding greater accountability in public expenditure and value-for-money in relation to what is perceived by them as a significant investment/expenditure on higher education.

In Ireland, a number of recent reports have contributed to the changing landscape of higher education. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* set out a national strategy for higher education to the year 2030. This strategy pointed out that for a country with a total population of less than five million, the number of publicly-funded higher education institutions, is excessive. While emphasising the separate missions of universities and Institutes of Technology, and criticising the tendency over recent decades for mission drift, the report recommended that the binary nature of Irish higher education should be maintained. However, while bearing this in mind, it also recommended that there should be greater collaboration between higher education institutions in contiguous geographical areas.

Since the publication of the Hunt report, the Higher Education Authority has engaged in a wide-ranging consultation process about the future landscape of Irish higher education. In May 2013, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, issued a major policy statement on the future structure and configuration of higher education in Ireland. The new configuration provides for a major programme of structural reform including institutional mergers and much greater levels of institutional collaboration, with the creation of a series of regional clusters of institutions. The Minster also announced his approval for three groups of institutes of technology to proceed towards detailed planning for a formal application for designation as technological universities.

In the press statement welcoming this reform, 'New Landscape for Higher Education', the Higher Education Authority stated that institutions will be expected to collaborate to re-organise their programme offerings so as 'to create higher quality programmes that are based

on critical mass and economies of scale, rather than low volume programmes that lack the necessary depth to provide a high quality experience' (HEA: 30 May 2013). It anticipates that the change will improve student choice by enabling them to transfer more easily between higher education institutions and to progress from further education to higher education.

Not everyone has welcomed these changes. Some academics and commentators have been critical of what they refer to as 'a new managerialism in higher education', the title of a recent publication, *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender* (Lynch, Grummell, Devine, 2012). Reviewing the book in the *Irish Times* (2013) Tom Dunne, a retired academic stated: 'Like a deadly, colourless gas, the elements of a quiet revolution have seeped through every area of Irish education during recent decades, poisoning the atmosphere'. He went on to state:

> The emphasis is now on outputs over inputs, on measuring progress rather than understanding process. Using narrowly defined arguments of "Efficiency", "Value for money" and "Relevance", Irish education is being turned into a commodity, designed to suit market forces, rather than a transformative experience for the individual that has incalculable social and cultural – and economic – value.

However, the state, as pay-master, is not the only driver of educational change. Professional bodies have also been drivers of change in higher education, not only because of the need for compliance with EU and international regulations, but also because of their awareness of the rapidly changing expectations within the professions themselves as well as by the 'clients' of the professions. Regulating and accrediting bodies such as the Medical Council, the Dental Council, An Bord Altranais, Engineers Ireland and the Teaching Council all have their own specific professional demands and higher education institutions have been changing and adapting their programmes to meet these demands.

Technological advances have also changed the nature of professional education and learning. Widespread online access to information in all professional fields provides virtually instant access to an unprecedented web of knowledge, for professionals and non-professionals alike. Flexible and blended learning opportunities are increasingly available for professionals who wish to upskill and to add to their initial professional qualifications. The challenge is no longer one of access to information but of funding, choice and time. To quote the HEA Policy paper, *Open and Flexible Learning* (2009):

> While traditional full-time on-campus provision is likely to remain a dominant form of provision in Irish higher education for the foreseeable future, it is envisaged that first-time higher education learners of any age will be supported on the same basis as full-time on-campus learners, to access higher education in a flexible way – through a combination of on-campus learning and ODL, on a part-time or a full-time basis. National and institutional funding mechanisms will have to reflect this new scenario. (8)

Moreover, in some cases, learners may take 'modules and accumulate credits from different institutions to cumulate a recognised personalised qualification at any one of the NQF Levels 6 through 10 (8-9).

Since the publication of this policy paper, the higher education funding model has remained largely unchanged in Ireland, and the financial disincentives to higher education institutions to provide open and distance learning courses have not yet been fully removed. However, developments internationally are beginning to have an impact on the higher education scene, in Ireland as elsewhere. The year 2012 has been referred to internationally as 'The Year of the MOOCs' (Massive Open Online Courses). International online networks such as Coursera, Udemy, edX, TED, and so on, have opened up learning to anybody who is interested in learning. The only barrier to the courses provided through MOOCs is hardware and broadband access. Some of the most prestigious and high-ranking universities in the world, such as Stanford, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have made available online, free of charge, a selection of their courses. While these courses may provide a challenge to traditional on-campus courses, Larry Cuban, a respected educational commentator, suggests in his blog, *MOOCs and Pedagogy: Part 2*, that MOOCs are simply another educational resource and will not replace the traditional role of teacher:

> A MOOC delivers a course to a student but a teacher teaches it. What students learn depends in part on how teachers teach. Online delivery of instruction is neither the same as pedagogy nor identical to students learning.

To conclude on a positive note, we can, in all of our professions and workplaces, play our part in 'creating the future'. The future is, to a significant extent, what we make it. We can be innovators or leaders who determine the course of the future or we can be reluctant followers who drag our feet and resist change as much as we can - until our engagement becomes inevitable. The choice is up to each one of us.

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