

The future of the universities – challenges and opportunities

Speaking at the seminar in Trinity College Dublin on Wednesday, 22 February, Don Thornhill¹ said that universities and other higher education institutions in Ireland and internationally are faced with an apparent contradiction. The importance of universities in society and to the economy has never been greater. Yet universities and university communities are concerned and disturbed. Many academics fear that the fundamental values of their institutions are under threat. Why is this so?

The importance of universities includes and transcends all areas of economic and social concern. Higher education has an essential role in many spheres of public and private life including:

- Promoting social inclusion and citizenship. Promoting access is an important task under this heading. Progress has been made; over half of all school leavers now go onto third level and despite serious inequalities based on class and income the prospects for young people from poor and socially disadvantaged backgrounds progressing to third level have improved considerably in the last 25 years; more needs to be done and the challenges of life long learning need more attention and resources
- Economic development –through raising the skills of the work force and generating new knowledge through research, development and innovation; universities are an important foundation of the “knowledge society” which is the foundation of our future prosperity and future social progress.
- Contributing to regional and cultural development

Yet university communities seem to be troubled – why?

He suggested that there might be four broad headings which provide some explanation for this sense of disquiet.

- Responding to change
- Financial stress
- Accountability and external scrutiny
- The threat to enduring and vital values

Change

The first is that university communities are facing intense pressures for change across a broad range of fronts. Change is almost always difficult; it is often messy. Yet failure to embrace change leads to decline and atrophy.

¹ Dr Don Thornhill is a former Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science and a former Executive Chairman of the Higher Education Authority. He is currently chairman of the National Competitiveness Council and of the Irish Payments Services Organisation (IPSO) and is a board member of a number of organisations.

Finance

Secondly, universities feel under intense financial pressure. Viewed from inside the university, government and society expect universities to do more for less. Yet governments can sometimes see universities as wealthy institutions with an insatiable desire for resources.

External scrutiny and accountability

The third is that universities find themselves subject to scrutiny from a range of stakeholders – including government, its agencies and media - in ways that are much more intense and pervasive than heretofore. Much of this scrutiny is appropriate and should have the effect of strengthening the institutions. But some is ill informed and based on misunderstandings or trivialisation – and can sometimes be damaging and dangerous.

Freedom under threat?

The fourth concern is perhaps the most profound. Some people in university communities fear that the enduring values of the university – particularly the necessity for freedom in teaching, scholarship, enquiry and publication are under threat – not always directly but sometimes indirectly- in subtle and not so subtle ways. The increased interest by government and business in research, particularly scientific and technological research, is welcomed – but sometimes with caution. Some worries include

- Fear of the consequences of “following the money”
- Constraints on publication of research results because of commercial interests
- Neglect of research in the humanities and social sciences
- Displacement of the essential missions of teaching and service to society by the emphasis on research and a search for excellence and a drive for high institutional ratings in peer reviewed research.

He said that all of these concerns are valid and that they have a place in the discourse of universities and in public debate although he commented that sometimes they are expressed stridently in ways which do little to encourage positive outcomes. And there are no easy answers. For example we historically underspent on research and development in Ireland. We are making progress at correcting that and it is vital that we establish a position for Ireland as a leading research based and informed society.

The way forward – positive engagement?

He suggested that positive engagement between universities and society is essential. It is vital that university people interrogate and try to understand the concerns and issues in wider society and continue to engage in two way dialogue with external stakeholders.

On the university side he suggested that there were a number of steps which universities and university communities could make themselves which would enhance their influence and their ability to strengthen the important values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. These include

- Greater involvement of non university people in governance including membership of governing bodies
- Greater attention to the need for efficient and effective leadership and management in university affairs – and the development of management styles which are effective but respectful of institutional traditions and values
- Convincing government and society of the values and necessity of academic freedom and institutional autonomy,
- Continued struggle to achieve the appropriate balances, in terms of status and resources within the universities between the essential missions of teaching, research and service to society.
- Emphasising and demonstrating the importance to society of research in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in science and technology, and finally
- Engaging robustly in the continuing and wider debates about societal and economic issues and policy directions.