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Towards a Coherent Tertiary Education Approach: European Union Policy Developments and Reflections on the Reform Agenda in Ireland: Issue paper

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Kenny, A.:Towards a Coherent Tertiary Education Approach: European Union Policy Developments and Reflections on the Reform Agenda in Ireland: Issue paper. TDA09 Conference, Gold Coast, Australia, 3-4 September, 2009.

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School of Construction

Articles

Dublin Institute of Technology *Year* 2009

Issue Paper: Towards a coherent tertiary education approach – European Union policy developments and reflections on the reform agenda in Ireland

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Issue Paper for TDA 09 Conference

(URL link http://www.tda.edu.au/cb_pages/tda_conference_2009.php)

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Towards a coherent tertiary education approach – European Union policy developments and reflections on the reform agenda in Ireland

This brief issue paper proposes that a coherent approach to tertiary education and training is necessary to enhance lifelong learning opportunities for citizens, in order to develop capacity and capabilities to deal with the challenges posed by the new world-of-work. To achieve this type of approach compatible systems and processes need to be introduced which facilitate communication between existing structures particularly in the areas of recognition, access, transfer and progression. The paper reviews key European Union education and training policy initiatives, citing them as examples of the construction of a meta-framework of systems and processes that support the move towards the emergence of a European tertiary education area. Finally reflections from a practitioner perspective are presented detailing some of the major policy reform initiatives in Ireland.

'Supranational organisations' (Ball, 2008) such as the OECD (2008), World Bank (2009) and UNESCO (2009) note that tertiary education policy development is now firmly on national government agendas in both developed and developing countries. Tertiary education is perceived as a major driver of economic progress within a global knowledge based economy. Education policy makers in developed countries which are currently experiencing the negative effects of the global economic crisis are engaging in reviewing their systems and exploring how they can effectively contribute towards meeting the needs of the new economic and social environment. One prominent response has been the

targeted concentration of resources into higher education specifically at PhD and Postdoc levels[1], in an effort to stimulate the growth of the knowledge economy and realise the potential economic rewards. However this type of approach can lead to claims of elitism and inequitable distribution of public finances favouring those who have already achieved high level qualifications while under resourcing and providing fewer opportunities to those who have obtained other types of qualifications. While the knowledge economy needs a substantial cohort of both PhD's and Postdocs it also requires a more signification percentage of the labour force that hold other qualifications[2] such as Masters, Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates. Further to sustain a knowledge driven economy the accumulated human capital[3] of the labour force needs to be continuously updated and remain relevant to the demands of the new world-of-work[4]. To facilitate this, policy makers need to consider adopting a systemic approach to policy development which endeavours to reduce the traditional sectoral and structural divisions that exist within the post secondary education sector. In particular the structural divisions and perceived value[5] differences between post secondary sectors such as vocational education, technical education, further education, adult education and higher education, and both formal and non-formal education and training. To realise potential efficiencies and enhance the effectiveness of post secondary education a coherent tertiary education and training policy framework approach which facilitates lifelong learning should be considered.

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1 For example in a Irish context the state funded universities have sought to gain a strategic position in the tertiary education sector by establishing a graduate research sector call Fourth Level. Claiming that Fourth Level will be a primary driver in the move towards a knowledge economy . This Fourth Level strategy enables the universities to leverage additional funding from the state and create a distance between other third level or tertiary education providers (for further details see the Irish University Website http://www.4thlevelireland.ie/).

2 For examples of the projected profile and distribution of qualifications for the labour force in Europe see CEDEFOP (2009) Future Skills Supply in Europe (URL link http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/546/4086_en.pdf) and in terms of Ireland see the EGFSN (2007) Tomorrows Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy (URL link http://www.skillsireland.ie/media/egfsn070306b_national_skils_strategy.pdf).

3 The usage of the term Human Capital here is related to the seminal work of both Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961).

4 According to the literature some of the general characteristics of the new world-of-work are flexibility, adoptability, mobility, insecurity, casualisation, innovative and creative. Although a notable addition in a European context is the political concept of 'flexcurity' which includes reducing labour market regulation (easy hire and fire) with increased social security mechanisms (see European Commission definition at URL link http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/definitions/FLEXICURITY.htm).

5 The City & Guilds Centre for Research (2008) produced an international research report which explored the perception and attitudes that students, parents and employers held in relation to skills and vocational education and training. The report presents findings from seven companies it can be accessed free from URL link http://www.skillsdevelopment.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=350 . For a philosophical account exploring the diverging values held between vocational and general education see Hyland and Hager (2003) Vocational Education and Training, published in Blake et el (2003, pp 271-288) Philosophy of Education, Blackwell

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Within a European Union education and training context over the last 10 years several key policy initiatives such as the Lisbon Strategy 1999[6], Bologna Process 1999[7], and European Qualification Framework 2006[8] have been implemented. These policy initiatives provide a meta-framework of education and training policy, the utilisation of these policies by member states is contributing towards the construction of a 'European Education Space' (Dale, 2009). The Bologna Process aims to achieve a European Higher Education Area that can further the intellectual, social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological base of Europe. The six principle measures are:

- Easily readable and comparable degrees;
- Two main cycles[9];
- System of credits[10];
- Promote mobility,
- Promote European co-operation in quality assurance[11];
- Promote European dimension in higher education.

The main premise of the Lisbon Strategy 1999 is to make Europe the most competitive knowledge based economy by 2010. The primary means identified to achieve this is increased investment in education and training, measured by the percentage of GDP a member state invests in education and training. The strategy sets out five key benchmarks for national education and training systems in Europe to reach by 2010:

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6 For the latest report on the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy and VET in Europe see CEDEFOP (2009) at URL link http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/528/3055_en.pdf .

7 The official EU Bologna Process website contains the most up-to-date information it can be accessed at URL link http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/ .

8 See official European Union (2008) information brochure on the EQF for a detailed explanation of the aims and objectives of the EQF this can accessed at URL link http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/eqf/broch_en.pdf

9The Bologna process originally contained two cycles, cycle 1 undergraduate (3 years) cycle 2 graduate (2 years) in 2003 a third cycle (Doctorate level) was added to the see URL link http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/ActionLines/third_cycle.htm .

10 A credit transfer system similar to the Bologna ECTS is currently being developed for VET. It is called the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) for latest details see EVECT Bulletin at URL link http://www.ecvet-projects.eu/Documents/Bulletins/ECVET_Bulletin_July_2009.pdf

11 For more details on quality assurance in Higher Education, see Kenny (2006) The Quality Movement Discourse in the Higher Education Sector: A General Review, download free from SSRN URL link http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=944768 and Kenny (2006) Quality, Evaluation: Policy, Theory and Practice in the Education Sector available free from SSRN URL link http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=945321

- Increase the number of Mathematics, Science and Technology Graduates (MST) to 748,000.
- Increase lifelong learning participation rates to 12.5%.
- Reduce early school leavers to 10%.
- Increase upper secondary level completions to 85%.
- Reduce low achievers in reading to 15.5%.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was formally adopted in 2008. It offers members states an eight level structure including technical criteria which can be utilised as a translator device to reference different countries qualification systems. While the implementation of the EQF is on a voluntary basis, it is worth noting Young's (2005) consideration, 'the implementation of an NQF is a revolutionary rather then an evolutionary process'. European Commission (2006) notes several reasons for the introduction of the EQF:

- It enables individuals to judge the value of their qualifications,
- It is a prerequisite for transfer and accumulation of qualifications,
- It improves employers ability to judge the relevance of qualifications,
- It allows education and training providers to compare profiles and assists the development of quality assurance.

While these policy initiatives have been adopted by both the European Commission and Parliament, the implementation of these polices at individual member states level is subject to the national political, economic and social criteria relevant to each member state. However from the take up by member states so far it is reasonable to suggest that these policies are stimulating the convergence of education and training systems in Europe, Dale and Robertson (2009) term this process the 'Europeanisation of Education'.

The Irish Government has been a keen supporter and advocate of the emergent European Union education and training policy narratives with their inherent human capital agenda. Policy makers in Irish Government Departments have pursued a strategy of early

adaptation in relation to implementing European policy. For example within the public funded higher education sector[12] the seven universities, thirteen Institutes of Technology and the Dublin Institute of Technology[13] have all developed processes and procedures which are aligned to the objectives of the Bologna Process. Further education and training investment commitments made by the Irish Government in successive National Development Plans (2000-2006[14] and 2007-2013[15]) fully concur with the objectives set out in the Lisbon Strategy. The Government also introduced legislation in 1999[16] in relation to the introduction of a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). In 2003 the 10 Level NQF[17] was launched, and in 2007 the ten Levels of the NFQ where referenced[18] with the eight levels of the EQF.

In terms of the structure and purpose of the post secondary education sector in Ireland there remains considerable divergence between the positions taking by prominent actors and sectoral representative associations[19]. An example of the different views is captured in two major reports which examined post secondary education in Ireland. The Skilbeck report (2003) recommended that Ireland move from a binary system towards an 'integrated tertiary education system' while the OECD (2004) review of higher education argues that 'Ireland should retain a differentiated tertiary education system'. However subsequent to these reports several factors emerged that began the process of integrating the tertiary sector. Legislation in 2006 brought the whole sector under the remit of the

12 For a full listing of the public funded universities and Institutes of Technology see the Higher Education Authority website at URL link http://www.hea.ie/en/AboutHEA#Universities .

13 The Dublin Institute of Technology has a separate legal standing (DIT Act 1992) and is an awarding body in its own right where as the other Institutes of Technology have a common legal basis (RTC Act 1992) and applied for delegated awarding authority from HETAC (http://www.hetac.ie/). ,

14 A review of the Irish Government's National Development Plan 2000-2006 is available from URL link http://www.ndp.ie/docs/NDP/CSF_2000-2006:_Review_-_Key_features_of_investment_under/1906.htm .

15 The Irish Government National Development Plan 2007-2013, Chapter 9 Human Capital Priority which sets out the projected investment in education and training is available at URL link http://www.ndp.ie/documents/NDP2007-2013/NDP_Main_Ch09.pdf .

16 A full copy of the Irish Government Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 can be accessed from URL link http://oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/1999/a2699.pdf .

17 Full details explaining the NFQ and its 10 Levels can be obtained from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland website at URL link http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/

18 See the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Bulletin Referencing the NFQ to the EQF at URL link http://www.nqai.ie/documents/EQFe-bulletinJune2009.pdf .

19 Some of the main sectoral representative associations are; the Irish University Association (http://www.iua.ie/index.html), Institutes of Technology Ireland (http://www.ioti.ie/), Dublin Institute of Technology (http://www.dit.ie/), Higher Education Colleges Association (http://www.heca.ie/aboutUs.php), Teachers Union of Ireland (http://www.tui.ie/) and Irish Federation of University Teachers (http://www.ifut.ie/) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (http://www.ibec.ie/IBEC/IBEC.nsf/vPages/home?OpenDocument).

one authority the Higher Education Authority (HEA), also in 2006 the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) granted delegated degree awarding authority to the Institutes of Technology, it should be noted that the DIT is an awarding body in it's own right as such it did not need HETAC delegated authority. Further in 2006 the Government allocated over 500 million euro (2006-2010) for the Strategic Innovation Fund[20] (SIF) the primary aim being to enhance collaboration and cooperation between higher education institutes. While in practice there is evidence of localised cooperation between academics, departments and schools from different higher education institutes, at structural level boundaries are still maintained. However change is imminent mainly due to three emergent factors:

1) The demands that the current economic crisis is placing on tertiary education.
2) The embedding of the NFQ requires structural changes in terms of recognition, access, transfer and progression.
3) Growing competition form private sector higher education providers.

The reform of the Irish tertiary education sector is moving at a substantial pace, the McCarthy (2009) report on the public sector has recommended numerous changes for tertiary education including the merger of two Dublin based IoTs with the DIT, the closure of two other IoTs and the establishment of more formal functional collaboration between regional higher education institutes. How precisely the new fiscal change agenda will impact on shaping the development of tertiary education in Ireland into the future is a matter that currently challenges policy makers and stakeholders in the sector.

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