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# The Future Direction of Institutes of Higher Education in Ireland and Their Pathway of Transformation: A Case Study of the Dublin Institute of Technology's "Operation Transformation" as a Leading Example of an Institute of the Future

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# THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF INSTITUTES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND THEIR PATHWAY OF TRANSFORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY'S "OPERATION TRANSFORMATION" AS A LEADING EXAMPLE OF AN INSTITUTE OF THE FUTURE

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## Abstract

This paper is an outline proposal for an EdD thesis with the University of Sheffield which has been accepted. The principle aim of this research is to investigate what might an institute of education be in the future through viewing the current changes afoot in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the underlying reasons for these changes to take place. It is not proposed that DIT is the ideal example but it is one example of Irish higher education (HE) in transition to be more students focused and flexible for future demands. The HE system in Ireland is broad in scope and encompasses the university sector, the technological sector, the colleges of education and private, independent colleges. Ireland is a society undergoing major change economically, but also demographically through recent migration and mobility of workers from all over Europe and beyond. In an economy as open as Ireland's it is vital that higher education operate to a maximum effectiveness responding to changing societal needs. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has recommended that Institutions need to compete globally and changes are being implemented to effect these recommendations. Such changes are already transpiring within the DIT as it has already undergone some operational structural changes which have seen the old Faculties of Tourism and Food and Faculty of Applied Arts merging to form one College of Arts and Tourism.

The methodology will be a case study of the DIT as it goes through its transition from traditional multi-site colleges to one main campus in the heart of Dublin's historical inner city. Individuals driving the process will be interviewed, as well as focus groups (Race *et al*, 1994 [49]) of staff and students in selected DIT sites (those already merged) to ascertain the internal stakeholders' perception of this change and what it means to them and the future of education. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of documents pertaining to the transition, interview transcripts and narratives, and marketing of DIT will be employed (Fairclough, 1993 [23]; Foucault, 1972; 2009 [25]) to discover what the *Institute of the Future* might resemble.

Keywords: Higher Education in Ireland, Change, Dublin Institute of Technology, Case study.

## 1 FIELD OF STUDY

The field of study is to capture a snapshot of contemporary change in the Irish HE system with a view to understanding how it is changing and why, by looking at one of the institutions undergoing most change. It will review the restructuring of an educational institution and organisation in transformation documented and analysed through a unique case study of change in progress.

### 1.1 Central Focus Issues to be Explored

What are the implications for people working within these changes and future students of these colleges? To what extent can the key actors within DIT shape the future of the institution and to what extent will DIT need to respond to the demands of the government? Will its autonomy be greater or more restricted in the future?

### **Background issues that will be explored:**

1. Explore the extent to which the distinctions between 'tradition' and 'non-traditional' students might be shifting within the transformation Irish HE and of DIT.
2. Explore the widening access and increasing participation debates within Irish Higher Education and DIT.
3. Explore the element of learning cultures (entrepreneurial, collegial etc.) espoused within the changes afoot in Irish HE especially DIT.

Therefore the main objective of the research will be to discover:

How do stakeholders (staff, students, etc.) feel about these changes and how are these changes being communicated to them?

## **2 RELEVANT LITERATURE**

1. ***Explore the extent to which the distinctions between 'tradition' and 'non-traditional' students might be shifting within the transformation Irish HE and of DIT.***

In the future there will be more emphasis on the non-traditional student (mature, international, up-skilling and re-skilling candidates) to enrol in the Institute as not only the population of the traditional school leaver declines but up-skilling drives those in the workplace, or who are unemployed, back to education for more knowledge acquisition and lifelong learning (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [4]; Hannam, 2003: 7 [30]; Rowley, 2003: 248 [52]). Should there really be a distinction between traditional and non-traditional students? As the access routes are distinctly different in Ireland at the moment there is a distinction, however should this also change in the future? There may also be an obligation to be more involved with the community and vice versa through corporate social responsibility creating employment opportunities (Joining up the Dots, DIT) etc.

As the involvement of the state and academy widen even more to involve access 'partnerships' within the community and 'market' this has an implication of the state and academy as 'service' providers to its citizens and a wider market of 'service consumers'. The 'market' provides the 'consumers' of education and therefore it is important to know, as a higher education institution, who your student market is, where they come from and their general demography.

The Chief Executive of the HEA, Tom Boland, has stated that Ireland should aim to double the number of full-time non-Irish higher education students studying here from 12,000 at present to 24,000 over the next decade. The Irish education system has at the moment fulltime students from 114 countries other than Ireland now studying here, with an increase of 170% of overseas students (HEA, 2008 [31]; 2008a [32]). Part time enrolments are also an important factor when attracting students who have been underrepresented in higher education in the past due to its mainly flexible mode of education (Murphy and Fleming, 2003 [42]).

Another key area which has been documented recently is of up-skilling and re-skilling, an area DIT seems eager to capture a portion of the market. Under the Government Labour Market Activation Fund, a range of up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities are available at DIT for people currently unemployed or students seeking to continue in education this year. (DIT advert, 2011)

A recent CAO Report (June 2010 [5]) has already indicated a record 14,606 mature applicants out of a total of 77,126 applicants. Many of these mature applicants will have lost jobs in the last year or more and now require up-skilling or re-skilling to get their foot back in the jobs market and particular in the 'smart economy'. This up-take of courses will not only benefit the individual but also have socioeconomic benefits for the country.

## **2. Explore the widening access and increasing participation debates within Irish HE and DIT.**

Widening access and increasing participation can only occur once flexibility of delivery and equality of access is available to all learners from all walks of life and all social backgrounds (Clancy, various years [7-11]; Department of Education and (Science) Skills, various years [15-20]; Higher Education Authority, various years [31-33]; Ball, 2003 [1]). Might the 'DIT in the Future' therefore be more of a 'Virtual' or 'e-learning' organisation? However this move assumes broadband coverage is available to all students and students own a computer which is not the case especially students of lower socio-economic backgrounds or many students from rural areas in Ireland.

To encourage students into higher education, widening access to increase participation has become central to national policy and economic competitiveness through Ireland becoming a "knowledge society" and a "learning economy".

At the moment participation in higher education in Ireland is high by European standards, with participation rate at 38% in the 20-year-old category compared to 32% across the other 25 European countries (O'Connell *et al.* 2006: 313 [44]). O'Connor (2007 [45]) indicates that 50-55% of 17-18 year olds now participate in higher education in Ireland and that the National Skills Strategy has set a target of 72% by 2020. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has established that the expansion in participation in Ireland however has mainly taken place in the 18-21 year olds, disproportionately from managerial and professional classes (OECD, 2006 [46]).

Research by Clancy, Lynch and the Department of Education and Science within Ireland is essential here. Access programmes have become fundamental to policy and are expected to promote equality of opportunities and foster social, cultural and economic inclusion. Institutes of Technology (IoT) Act (1992 [36]) led the way towards access and equal opportunities for students by allowing more places on higher education courses and introduction a free fees initiative (Department of Education and Science, 1992 [16]) for higher education students. Following on from this the Institutes of Technology Act 2006 and Universities Act 1997 require institutions to have equality of access policies in place for people from sections of society who are under-represented in higher education. Previous to this the Higher Education Authority Act 1971 requires the HEA to promote equality of opportunity in higher education and to review equality policies.

A landmark report on higher education, the Hunt Report (2011 [34]), is now set to return student tuition charges as colleges face unprecedented financial pressures. The recommendation will put fees back on the agenda even though the present government has vetoed any changes to the free fees scheme. However given the current economic climate, monies required for investment purposes in education and colleges nationwide is no longer available or highly unlikely and will therefore have to come from other sources. Will the introduction of fees then change the student profile, the number of students or indeed where we source our students (nationally or internationally) in the future? Will this increase the need for more flexible deliveries of courses via e-learning or a move towards a 'virtual' learning environment?

A review of the Institutes culture to provide innovation, entrepreneurialism and employability of its graduates is therefore important at this stage.

## **3. Explore the element of learning cultures (entrepreneurial, collegial etc.) espoused within the changes afoot in Irish HE especially DIT.**

As the current global crisis and recession has indicated more private investment is needed to meet the costs of education, (McCarthy, 2009 [41]) will the institute drive this from within through innovation and entrepreneurial hubs, or will it involve more partnership (Parry, 2006: 409 [47]) with industry and therefore a lower dependency on the state (Trow, 1974 [58] *in* Clark, 1983 [12]). As most institutes of technology are controlled by the state their cultures are traditionally bureaucratic where change is slow to happen. The present and future climates are envisaged to be climates of constant change and innovation and institutes must lead this change through newer cultures of entrepreneurship (Silver, 2003 [54]; Schein, 1984 [53]; Clark, 1983 [12]; Berger and Milem, 2000 [2]).

Education is expected to serve the needs of society and when that society is undergoing significant changes pressures emerge to improve the alignment of education and society. Participation in education is both for the betterment of the individual, society or community within which they live and/or work and eventually the economy (National Competitiveness Council (NCC), 2009: 9 [43]). In July (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) 2010 [22]) the EGFSN chairperson Una Halligan stated the rising demand from school leavers and the recently unemployed for a third level qualification putting colleges under strain is giving the overwhelming message that education creates opportunities.

Participation on lifelong learning courses bring with it the pride of gaining qualifications, and it can also contribute to new opportunities, access to better employment and ultimately an improved better quality of life. Lifelong learning can also provide the individual the autonomy to be able to shape their own educational programmes and subsequently their own lives (Usher and Edwards, 1994 [59]; Edwards *et al*, 2002 [21]). Qualifications are indispensable assets seen as cultural capital (Stevenson, 2001: 2 [56]; Hannam, 2003: 7 [30]) and passports into both education and work and out of state welfare dependence (Blair, 1998: 9 [3]). Higher education, further education and community education are seen as a conduits to a better life as it is “a weapon against poverty... the route to participation and active citizenship” and creative cultural responses to oppressive life circumstances, shame and social marginalisation (Warmington, 2003 [61]).

As the lifelong learning society is conceptualised largely in terms of maintaining a flexible and competitive economy in the knowledge society, the concept of an entrepreneurial society will be proposed to fill the gap which has emerged since the exit of many international companies for cheaper labour elsewhere. Within all levels of education entrepreneurship should be encouraged and embedded in the curricula from the earliest stages as a prevention rather than cure to the current economic crisis in Ireland.

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor report (2005 [26]) highlights the need for early adoption of entrepreneurship in education from as early as primary education, but to reinforce entrepreneurship across all levels if indigenous enterprise is to flourish in the future and a culture of entrepreneurship is to be adopted and initiated as a career choice (Report of the Small Business Forum, 2006 [50]). Curricula and assessment mechanisms throughout education should promote critical thinking, entrepreneurship and innovation (NCC, 2009: 6 [43]). Together with this is are the Labour Market Activation Programmes in areas of entrepreneurship and business set-up now being run across the community and Further Education and Training Awards Council, the IoT's, and Universities highlighting the importance of not only the knowledge society but of a developing entrepreneurial economy.

What was discovered through CDA of DIT's culture is that the culture is predominantly '*collegial*' and '*student centred*' with elements of '*entrepreneurialism*' driven by '*bureaucracy*' from State level. These cultures and subcultures are heavily influenced by the staff and students within DIT, but also the changing nature of society and the global economy we work in, as Government policies, especially the DIT Act 1992 ([36] and amended Act 2006 [37]), play an important role in DIT's functions.

As the community with DIT changes constantly the discourses at local and hierarchical level take on new '*styles*'. It remains to be seen if DIT's culture will change dramatically once the transition to Grangegorman is complete as most of the documents referred to found their origins within the 2009 DIT Strategic Plan (social and cultural influence) and the Acts and policy reports from government (state and economic influence).

### **3 OUTLINE OF THE PROPOSED METHOD OF INQUIRY**

The methodology will be a case study of the DIT as it goes through its transition from traditional multi-site colleges towards one main campus in the heart of Dublin's historical inner city. Individuals driving the process will be interviewed, as well as focus groups (Race *et al*, 1994 [49]) of staff and students in selected DIT sites to ascertain the internal stakeholders' perception of this change and what it means to them and the future of education. A Critical Discourse Analysis of documents pertaining to the transition, interview transcripts and narratives, and marketing of DIT will be employed (Fairclough, 1993 [23]; Foucault, 1972; 2009 [25]) to discover what the '*DIT of the Future*' might resemble.

### **3.1 Methodology**

Research methodology is the research design that shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998: 7 [14]). Qualitative research exists in the interpretative research paradigm outlined by Crotty (1998: 5 [14]). Ethno-methodology, social constructionism and phenomenology are influencers of this paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001 [13]).

#### *3.1.1 Social Constructionism and Phenomenology*

To explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that *construct and are constructed* (epistemology) by interactive human behaviour. Social constructionism claim that people construct their own meanings and learning by building on their previous knowledge and experience and the interactions of society. Crotty (1998: 9 [14]) continues that the goal of the research within social constructivism is to rely as much as possible on the participant's views of the situation being studied, using broad general questions and using narrative analysis formed through interaction. This paradigm is commonly described as the qualitative approach to research as the phenomenological method adopts a subjective style, in that the researcher and the research or study are linked (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; 2003 [35]).

An ethnographic type case study of DIT, including interviews and observations with willing participants, would fulfil this perspective, involving the staff and students to reflect on their lives in education as it changes in the current economic climate. This is a reflective process for them and would involve the participants' story to be told. They would be 'reinterpreting' and 'reflecting on' their involvement through use of their own "voice". This observation can be prolonged and repetitive to validate results and will require bracketing of personal opinions and experiences to the majority throughout the case study within DIT as although I am the researcher I am also a staff member within DIT and care will be taken at all times.

#### *3.1.2 Case Studies*

Case studies are strategies for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon in its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (Robson, 1993: 52) and offer the opportunity for a holistic view of a process, as the whole can only be understood by treating it as the central object of study (Gummesson, 2000 [29]; Yin, 2003: 1 [64]). Cohen *et al* (2000 [13]) suggests that,

*Case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis.*

Within case study research various qualitative methods are available to the researcher to assess the change process, experiences of staff and students and resulting educational cultures which will influence learner motives for learning (see for example Light and Cox, 2001 [40]; Yin, 2003 [64]; Greene and Caracelli, 1997 [28]; Chatterji, 2005 [6]; West *et al* 2007 [62]). White (2000; 20 [63]) suggests that when conducting research the selection of an appropriate methodology and choice of suitable techniques are of paramount importance and in this instance student surveys, focus groups with staff and interviews with those steering the process are effective in eliciting the changes within the college.

### **3.2 Methods**

Considering the methodology, focus group interviews with staff and students within the college will be employed to provide a "voice" for these people involved in the changes taking place and should give a holistic view of the more personal opinions of the college system as perceived by the staff and students.

### 3.2.1 Focus Group Interviews

The focus group technique for interviewing has been known variously as the 'group interview' (Perisco and Heaney, 1986 [48]); the 'group depth interview' (Golman and McDonald, 1987 [27]); the 'focus group' and the 'focus group interview' (Lederman, 1990 cited in Walden, 2006, p.222-223 [39]). The focus group interview allows for a relaxed setting where discussion of a topic will be able to take place. Wall (2001: 24 [60]) highlights their inexpensiveness and efficiencies when interviewing a large number of interviewees within the same group. As a result of some focus group discussion it is common for further individual interviews to take place to further probe comments made within the wider focus group. Focus groups can be used at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study (Kreuger, 1988 [38]); during a study (Race *et al*, 1994 [49]); or after a study has been completed to assess any further issues arising from the research.

*Focus groups are contrived settings, bringing together a specifically chosen sector of the population to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where the interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes* (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001, 288 [13]).

### 3.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

From the methods outlined above the analysis of findings will be conducted using CDA as the lens to understand the changes within. The principal focus of CDA is on text which are social actions of spoken and written language which form '*how we do things*' within Institutions (in this way referring to the Institution's culture). Examples are written text (books used, communications sent, strategies and policies), spoken text (classroom interactions, tutorial processes) visual texts (college web pages, academic job adverts, college adverts). These '*genres*' within texts are historical and socio-cultural actions open to invention and reinvention, but some text will continue to perform its fundamental purpose. For example, the classroom is an area where written text (books) can be deconstructed and reconstructed through interpretation, understanding and dissemination of knowledge; and where spoken text (discourse and interactions with learner and lecturer) can be analysed for cultural and social interactions of power and authority and subordination and sometimes marginalisation.

Within the Faculty of Tourism and Food the culture and atmosphere is one of '*collegiality*' and '*learner centred*' in the classes, committee meetings and learning environments. The use of CDA as a tool for analysis will illustrate how CDA can view what the culture now is in DIT, and what it hopes to be in the future campus at Grangegorman. This is influenced through government, economic, socio-cultural and internal cultural influences. CDA makes visible the way in which Institutions and their discourse shape us through their culture. By working with documents looking at text, sentences and players within society who may have influence over the documents it develops into something like peeling away layers of an onion. CDA can therefore apply interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to look at how texts construct representations of the world, social identities and social relationships. Fairclough (1993: 136 [23]) suggests that he uses critical discourse analysis through three means: text, social practice and discourse practice (production and interpretation of text). He also recommends during analysis to remember that discourse is shaped and constrained by social structures (class, status, age, ethnicity and gender) and by culture (Fairclough, 2000 [24]). CDA will also enable analysis of the discourse within text, observations, meetings and interviews to support this research.

## 4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper is an outline proposal for an EdD thesis with the University of Sheffield which has been accepted. The principle aim of this research is to investigate what might an institute of education be in the future through viewing the current changes afoot in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the underlying reasons for these changes to take place. It is not proposed that DIT is the ideal example but it is one example of Irish higher education (HE) in transition to be more students focused and flexible for future demands. The paper has outlined the field of research, the central issues to be explored and the rationale for the thesis, as well as the main methods to be employed in the research.

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