Study Tour to Ireland: Main Takeaways

19 and 21 January 2021

The virtual study tour of Ireland was focused on two aspects of the Irish higher education system: its governance and academic staff development. The program of the visit in annex. The PowerPoint presentations prepared by the 23 contributors provide a comprehensive description of higher education in Ireland and the role of the different actors within. After a short introduction on the purposes and the context of this study tour, the following summary focuses on two major aspects: the success factors that contribute to Ireland's capacity to change and lessons learned with respect to academic careers.

I.   Introduction
1.1 Purposes of the study tour

The two objectives set for this virtual study tour are:

- To examine the implementation of the National Strategy (obstacles and success factors) and its impact on institutional behavior, with a specific focus on teaching and learning, learning analytics, academic staff workloads and academic staff development.
- To discuss the steering of the system including the respective roles of the Department and the HEA, as well as that of the representative bodies such as staff unions, the Irish University Association (IAU) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

1.2 Historical context

Since the late 1950s, Ireland has changed from an agricultural-based to a knowledge-based society, with a strong international orientation. This change was made possible by sustained investment in all levels of education, including higher education, and attention paid to ensuring equity and access to higher education.

Four important aspects of the Irish higher education system include the following:

1. A National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, published in 2011 in the midst of the financial crisis, provides several objectives, including about teaching and learning. The Strategy has been implemented and has led to significant reforms in the sector.

2. The Irish system is recognized for being student-centered, inclusive and supportive of student learning and attainment.

3. The Irish sector is binary and includes universities and institutes of technology (IoT). Recently, a new institutional type has been created: Technological University (they will be two TU as of January 2021). Beyond institutional cooperation within each subsectors, there is a fair amount of cooperation across the sector as a whole (e.g., a recent initiative and the National Forum for the Enhancement and Learning in Higher Education).

4. The [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science](#) (the Department) and the [Higher Education Authority](#) (HEA) are responsible for the governance of the sector.

II.   A successful change management process

Irish higher education has been very successful in ensuring access and success of a diverse student population. A number of reforms have been implemented over the years and these are valued by all the major players in the system. As a small country, Ireland intends to stay ahead of the curve. Thanks to its success in higher education, it has been able to transition from an agricultural society to a knowledge-economy.

The successful implementation of a series of reforms are due to several factors:

1. Long-term, **national strategy** with clear objectives and targets, including a sustained **commitment** on education, and higher education. This is not only at the level of the ministry in charge of higher education, but it is also a commitment at the highest level of government. This commitment has been sustained over time.

2. **International mindset**: international benchmarking is done by the Ministry, the HEA and the institutions and international experts are used routinely. All the major actors keep track of how well the Irish system is doing, in comparison to European and international trends.

3. Ministry sets up the conditions to allow institutions to work optimally. It is focused on the big picture and making sure that the **system** operates well. The Higher Education Authority (HEA), a buffer organization, works with **individual institutions**.

4. **Focused on innovation**: Seed funding is available to incentivize change.

5. **Inclusive and consensual:** There is a significant number of actors, all of them committed to making sure that Irish higher education is performing well. Each actor has its own agenda and plays a role in the system. Consultation of all major actors for policy development, including the students. This is true at the system and the institutional levels.

6. **Transparency and expertise:** Transparency is important, and the major organizations and agencies have expert staff that can contribute to policy development, include the Teachers Union.

7. **Communities of practice** are promoted by the sector. Examples discussed in the seminar include the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, and the two HE associations (IUA and THEA).

8. **Enhancement-oriented evaluations** to examine how well the system delivers as well as each institution. This is done by government agencies, the associations and each higher education institution. The system and the institutions are frequently evaluated to ensure that they are achieving the objectives set.

9. **Evidence base:** HEA and the institutions provide **good databases. Good practice publications** are available from the various actors

In short, the system relies on top-down and bottom-up initiatives and activities as well as on joint-up activities.

III.   Academic careers

The main learning points for an academic career framework development are:

1. Potential of non-governmental coordination of development activities;

2. The adaptiveness of the framework for careers of academics working in different realms of academic work: research, teaching and more applied fields such as continuous learning and third-stream activities;

3. The importance of balancing regional, national and international aims and objectives;

4. The coordination of steering across governmental sectors (education, science, employment, competitiveness, skills, technology and R&D).

In developing the Latvian career framework, the above-mentioned learning points can be taken into account regardless of the different administrative tradition. The non-governmental coordinator does not necessary require buffer organizations or heavy state substitutes but the clear benefits of it can be achieved by supporting institutional collaboration of HEIs, for instance in teaching and learning development, HR-management and development of joint support and mentoring programs for doctoral students and early career researchers. In addition, a disciplinary collaboration could be supported.

The balancing between different tasks of academic work is an issue also in Ireland. The study tour revealed that research is dominant field of academic work when discussing career development. However, we learned that other parts of academic work can be also analyzed and appreciated. Also, third-stream activities (service to society) and lifelong learning can be taken into account and appreciated via different competitive elements (scholarships, awards, portfolios).

As a small nation, Ireland, like Latvia, is supportive of regional development of higher education regardless of the fact that a major part of higher education is located in Dublin. A lesson learnt from the study tour is that the national priorities and international excellence should not be the sole benchmarks for the quality and success of higher education, but that the regional needs should be also take into account. Attractive career options should be available in different parts of the country and national mobility scheme should be made easy and supported.

Ireland has a newly established department "Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science". Based on the study visit and the short experience of the new department, it is too early to say whether it is an optimal combination for steering Irish higher education. However, it is a useful reminder that steering and ministerial structure have an impact on the content of higher education policies and on policy priorities such as the balance between teaching, research and third-stream activities. The academic career framework should take into account the needs of different policy sectors by providing entry and exit points for leading experts working in different sectors of society. It cannot only concentrate on the self-sustainability of the academic work force.

<p style="text-align:center">LATVIA ACADEMIC CAREER FRAMEWORK</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Virtual Study Visit – Ireland</p>

<p style="text-align:center">January 19 & 21, 2021</p>

Tuesday, 19 January 2021

11.30 am **Overview of the Irish landscape**
by Ellen Hazelkorn, Professor Emeritus, Technological University Dublin and Joint Editor, *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*

12.00 pm **Steering the system**
by William Beausang, Assistant Secretary, Tertiary Education & Skills Policy Division, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

1.00 pm **The National Strategy: Attaining the goals**
by Tom Boland, former CEO, Higher Education Authority

2.15 pm **Higher Education Authority: The Role of a Buffer Agency**
by Tim Conlon, Head of Policy and Strategic Planning, and Ruaidhri Neavyn, Special advisor on HE Policy Development

3.30 pm **Irish University Association**

- **Role and ways of working**
  by Nora Trench Bowles, Head of Lifelong learning, Skills and Quality

- **Promoting excellence in teaching**
  by Sharon Flynn, Project Manager - Enhancing Digital Capacity in Irish Universities, Associate Director, Centre for the Excellence of Teaching and Leaning, NUI Galway

4.30 pm **Technological Higher Education Association: Role and Ways of Working**
by Joseph Ryan, CEO, and Jim Murray, Director of Academic Affairs and Deputy CEO

Thursday, 21 January 2021

12.00 pm **National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and learning in Higher Education: Role and Impact**
by Lynn Ramsey, Board Chair, and Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Letterkenny Institute of Technology (TBC) and Lewis Purser, Board Member, and Director Learning, teaching and Academic Affairs, IUA

1.00 pm **Promoting Academic Staff Development in HEIs: A Panel Discussion**
by Jennifer Harvey, Head Learning, Teaching & Technology Centre, TU Dublin; Alison Hood, Dean of Teaching and Learning, Maynooth University and Moira Maguire, Head of Learning and Teaching, Dundalk Institute of Technology

2.00 pm **Teachers Union of Ireland: Role, Priorities and Ways of Working**
by a delegation led by Michael Gillespie, General Secretary

3.30 pm **Reflection and Closing**